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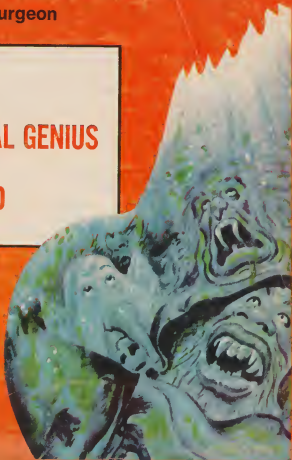
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The DREAMING JEWELS

By THEODORE STURGEON

Was it possible the eyes of a toy held a secret that science never dreamed of? And if not—what were the strange jewel-eyes? . . .

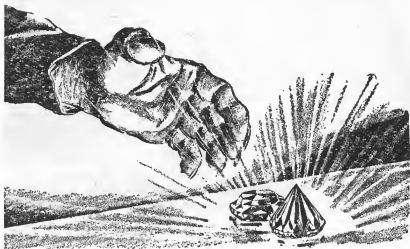
THEY CAUGHT the kid doing something disgusting out under the bleachers at the high-school stadium, and he was sent home from the grammar school across the street. He was eight years old then. He'd been doing it for years.

In a way it was a pity. He was a nice kid, a nice-looking kid too, though not particularly outstanding. There were other kids, and teachers, who liked him a little bit, and some who disliked him a little bit; but everyone jumped on him when it got around. His name was Horty—Horton, that' is—Bluett. Naturally he

caught blazes when he got home.

He opened the door as quietly as he could, but they heard him, and hauled him front and center into the living room where he stood flushing, with his head down, one sock around his ankle, and his arms full of books and a catcher's mitt. He was a good catcher, for an eight-year-old. He said, "I was—"

"We know," said Armand Bluett. Armand was a bony individual with a small mustache and cold wet eyes. He clapped his hands to his forehead and then threw up his arms. "My God, boy, what in Heaven's name



made you do a filthy thing like that?" Armand Bluett was not a religious man, but he always talked like that when he clapped his hands to his head, which he did quite often.

Horty did not answer. Mrs. Bluett, whose name was Tonta, sighed and asked for a highball. She did not smoke, and needed a substitute for the smoker's thoughtful match-lit pause when she was at a loss for words. She was so seldom at a loss for words that a fifth of rye lasted her six weeks. She and Armand were not Horton's parents. Horton's parents were upstairs, but the Bluetts did not know it. Horton was allowed to call Armand and Tonta by their first names.

"Might I ask," said Armand icily, "how long you have had this nauseating habit? Or was it an experiment?"

Horty knew they weren't going to make it easy on him. There was the same puckered expression on Armand's face as when he tasted wine and found it unexpectedly good.

"I don't do it much," Horty said, and waited.

"May the Lord have mercy on us for our generosity in taking in this little swine," said Armand, clapping his hands to his head again. Horty let his breath out. Now that was over with. Armand said that every time he was angry. He marched out to mix Tonta a highball.

"Why did you do it, Horty?" Tonta's voice was more gentle only because her vocal cords were more gently shaped than her husband's. Her face showed the same implacable cold.

"Well, I—just felt like it, I guess." Horty put his books and catcher's mitt down on the footstool.

TONTA TURNED her face away from him and made an unspellable, retching syllable. Armand strode

back in, bearing a tinkling glass.

"Never heard anything like it in my life," he said scornfully. "I suppose it's all over the school?"

"I guess so."

"The children? The teachers too, no doubt. But of course. Anyone say anything to you?"

"Just Dr. Pell." He was the principal. "He said—said they could..."

"Speak up!"

Horty had been through it once. Why, why go through it all again? "He said the school could get along without f-filthy savages."

"I can understand how he felt," Tonta put in, smugly.

"And what about the other kids? They say anything?"

"Hecky brought me some worms. And Jimmy called me Sticky-tongue." And Kay had laughed, but he didn't mention that.

"Sticky-tongue. Not bad, that, for a kid. Ant-eater." Again the hand clapped against the brow. "My God, what am I going to do if Mr. Anderson greets me with 'Hi, Sticky-tongue!' Monday morning? This will be all over town, sure as God made little apples." He fixed Horty with the sharp wet points of his gaze. "And do you plan to take up bug-eating as a profession?"

"They weren't bugs," Horty said diffidently and with accuracy. "They were ants. The little brown kind."

Tonta choked on her highball. "Spare us the details."

"My God," Armand said again, "what'll he grow up as?" He mentioned two possibilities. Horty understood one of them. The other made even the sophisticated Tonta jump. "Get out of here."

Horty went to the stairs while Armand thumped down exasperatedly beside Tonta. "I've had mine," he said. "I'm full up to here. That

brat's been the symbol of failure to me ever since I laid eyes on his dirty face. This place isn't big enough—*Horton!*"

"Huh."

"Come back here and take your garbage with you. I don't want to be reminded that you're in the house."

Horty came back slowly, staying out of Armand Bluett's reach, picked up his books and the catcher's mitt, dropped a pencil-box—at which Armand my-Godded again—picked it up, almost dropped the mitt, and finally fled up the stairs.

Once in his room, he sank down on the edge of the bed with his arms still full of his books. He did not close the door because there was none, due to Armand's conviction that privacy was harmful for youngsters. He did not turn on the light because he knew everything in the room, knew it with his eyes closed. There was little enough. Bed, dresser, closet with a cracked cheval glass. A child's desk, practically a toy, that he had long outgrown. In the closet were three oiled-silk dress-covers stuffed full of Tonta's unused clothes, which left almost no space for his.

His...

None of this was really his. If there had been a smaller room, he would have been shoved into it. There were two guest bedrooms on this floor, and another above, and they almost never had guests. The clothes he wore weren't his; they were concessions to something Armand called "my position in this town"; rags would have done if it weren't for that.

He rose, the act making him conscious of the clutter he still clutched in his arms. He put it down on the bed. The mitt was his, though. He'd

bought it for seventy-five cents from the Salvation Army store. He got the money by hanging around Dempdorff's market and carrying packages for people, a dime a trip. He had thought Armand would be pleased; he was always talking about resourcefulness and earning ability. But he had forbidden Horty ever to do that again. "My God! People will think we are paupers!" So the mitt was all he had to show for the episode.

All he had in the world—except, of course, Junky.

HE LOOKED, through the half-open closet door, at the top shelf and its clutter of Christmas-tree lights (the Christmas tree was outside the house, where the neighbors could see—never inside), old ribbons, a lampshade, and—Junky.

He pulled the oversized chair away from the undersized desk and carried it—if he had dragged it, Armand would have been up the stairs two at a time to see what he was up to, and if it was fun, forbidden it—and set it down carefully in the closet doorway. Standing on it, he felt behind the leftovers on the shelf until he found the hard square bulk of Junky. He drew it out, a cube of wood, gaudily painted and badly chipped, and carried it to the desk.

Junky was the kind of toy so well-known, so well-worn, that it was not necessary to see it frequently, or touch it often, to know that it was there. Horty was a foundling—found in a park one late fall evening, with only a receiving blanket tucked about him. He had acquired Junky while he was at the Home, and when he had been chosen by Armand as an adoptee (during Armand's campaign for City Counsellor, which he lost, but which he thought would

be helped along if it were known he had adopted a "poor little homeless waif") Junky was part of the bargain.

Horty put Junky softly on the desk and touched a worn stud at the side. Violently at first, then, with rusted-spring hesitancy, and at last defiantly, Junky emerged, a jack-in-the-box, a refugee from a more gentle generation. He was a Punch, with a chipped hooked nose which all but met his upturned, pointed chin. In the gulch between these stretched a knowing smile.

But all Junky's personality—and all his value to Horty—was in his eyes. They seemed to have been cut, back-faceted, from some leaded glass which gave them a strange, complex glitter, even in the dimmest room. Time and again Horty had been certain that those eyes had a radiance of their own, though he could never quite be sure.

He murmured, "Hi, Junky."

The jack-in-the-box nodded with dignity, and Horty reached and caught its smooth chin. "Junky, let's get away from here. Nobody wants us. Maybe we wouldn't get anything to eat, and maybe we'd be cold, but gee... Think of it, Junky. Not being scared when we hear *his* key in the lock, and never sitting at dinner while he asks questions until we have to lie, and—and all like that." He did not have to explain himself to Junky.

He let the chin go, and the grinning head bobbed up and down, and then nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

"They shouldn't 'a been like that about the ants," Horty confided. "I didn't *drag* nobuddy to see. Went off by myself. But that stinky Hecky, he's been watching me. An' then he sneaked off and got Mr. Carter. That was no way to do, now was it,

Junky?" He tapped the head on the side of its hooked nose, and it shook its head agreeably. "I hate a sneak."

"You mean me, no doubt," said Armand Bluett from the doorway.

Horty didn't move, and for a long instant his heart didn't either. He half crouched, half cowered behind the desk, not turning toward the doorway.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothin'."

Armand beated him across the cheek and ear. Horty whimpered, once, and bit his lip. Armand said, "Don't lie. You are obviously doing something. You were talking to yourself, a sure sign of a degenerating mind. What's this—oh. Oh yes, the baby toy that came with you. Your estate. It's as repulsive as you are." He took it from the desk, dropped it on the floor, wiped his hand on the side of his trousers, and carefully stepped on Junky's head.

HORTY shrieked as if it were his head, not the toy's, which was being crushed, and leapt at Armand. So unexpected was the attack that the man was bowled right off his feet. He fell heavily and painfully against the bedpost, grabbed at it and missed, and went to the floor. He sat there for a moment grunting and blinking, and then his little eyes narrowed and fixed themselves on the trembling Horty. "Mmm—hm!" said Armand in a tone of great satisfaction, and rose. "You should be exterminated." He grasped the slack of Horty's shirt and struck him. He hit the boy's face, back and forth, as he spoke. "Homicidal, that's what you are. I was going to send you away to a school. But it isn't safe. The police will take care of you. They have a place for juvenile delinquents."

He rushed the sodden child across the room and jammed him into the closet. "This will keep you safe until the police get here," he panted, and slammed the door. The hinge side of it caught three fingers of Horty's left hand.

At the boy's shriek of very real agony Armand snapped the door open again. "No use in your yelling. You—My God! What a mess. Now I suppose I'll have to get a doctor. There's no end—absolutely no end to the trouble you cause. Tonta!" He ran out and down the stairs. "Tonta!"

"Yes, Peaches."

"That young devil stuck his hand in the door. Did it on purpose, to excite sympathy. Bleeding like a stuck pig. You know what he did? He struck me. He attacked me, Tonta! It's 'not safe to have him in the house!"

"You poor darling! Did he hurt you?"

"A wonder he didn't kill me. I'm going to call the police."

"I'd better go up while you're phoning," said Tonta. She wet her lips.

But when she reached the room, Horty was gone. There was a lot of excitement for a while after that. At first Armand wanted to get his hands on Horty for his own purposes, and then he began to be afraid of what people might say if the boy gave his own garbled version of the incident. But a day went by, and a week, and a month, and then it was safe to look to heaven and say mysteriously, "He's in safe hands now, the poor little tyke," and people could answer, "I understand..." Everyone knew he was not Armand's child, anyway.

But Armand Bluett tucked one idea snugly away in the corner of his mind. That was to look out, in

the future, for any young man with three fingers missing from his left hand.

CHAPTER II

THE HALLOWELLS lived at the edge of town, in a house that had only one thing wrong with it; it was at the intersection where the State Highway angled into the end of Main Street, so that the traffic roared night and day past both the front and back gates.

The Hallowell's taffy-headed daughter, Kay, was as full of social consciousness as only a seven-year-old can be. She had been asked to empty the trash, and as usual she opened the back gate a crack and peeped out at the highway, to see if anyone she knew would catch her at the menial task.

"Horty!"

He shrank into the fog-swirled shadows of the traffic-light standard.

"Horton Bluett, I see you."

"Kay..." He came to her, staying close to the fence. "Listen, don't tell nobody you saw me, huh?"

"But wh—oh. You're running away!" she blurted, noticing the parcel tucked under his arm. "Horty—are you sick?" He was white, strained. "Did you hurt your hand?"

"Some." He held his left wrist with his right hand, tightly. His left hand was wrapped in two or three handkerchiefs. "They was going to get the police. I got out the window onto the shed roof and hid there all afternoon. They was lookin' all over the street and everywhere. You won't tell?"

"I won't tell. What's in the package?"

"Nothin'."

If she had demanded it, grabbed at it, he would probably never have

seen her again. Instead she said, "Please, Horty."

"You can look." Without releasing his wrist, he turned so she could pull the package out from under his arm. She opened it—it was a paper bag—and took out the hideous broken face of Junky. Junky's eyes glittered at her, and she squeaked. "What is it?"

"It's Junky. I had him since before I was born. Armand, he stepped on it."

"Is that why you're running away?"

"Kay! What are you doing out there?"

"Coming, Mother! Horty, I got to go. Horty, are you coming back?"

"Not ever."

"Gee...that mister Bluett, he's so mean..."

"Kay Hallowell! Come in this instant. It's raining!"

"Yes, Mother! Horty, I wannit to tell you. I shouldn'ta laughed at you today. Hecky brought you the worms, and I thought it was a joke, thass all. I didn't know you really did eat ants. Gee... I et some shoe-polish once. That's nothin'."

Horty held out his crooked elbow and she carefully put the package under it. He said, as if he had just thought of it—and indeed he had—"I will come back, Kay. Someday."

"Kay!"

"'Bye, Horty." And she was gone, a flash of taffy hair, yellow dress, a bit of lace, changed before his eyes to a closed gate in a board fence and the sound of dwindling quick footsteps.

Horton Bluett stood in the dark drizzle, cold, but with heat in his ruined hand and another heat in his throat. This he swallowed, with difficulty, and, looking up, saw the broad inviting tailgate of a truck

which was stopped for the traffic light. He ran to it, tossed his small bundle on it, and squirmed up, clawing with his right hand, trying to keep his left out of trouble. The truck lurched forward; Horty scrambled wildly to stay on. The package with Junky in it began to slide back toward him, past him; he caught at it, losing his own grip, and began to slip.

SUDDENLY there was a blur of movement from inside the truck, and a flare of terrible pain as his smashed hand was caught in a powerful grip. He came very close to fainting with it; when he could see again he was lying on his back on the jolting floor of the truck, holding his wrist again, expressing his anguish in squeezed-out tears and little, difficult grunts.

"Gee, kid, you don't care how long you live, do you?" It was a fat boy, apparently his own age, bending over him, his bowed head resting on three chins. "What's the matter with your hand?"

Horty said nothing. He was quite beyond speech for the moment. The fat boy, with surprising gentleness, pressed Horty's hand away from the handkerchiefs and began laying back the cloth. When he got to the inner layer, he saw the blood by the wash of light from a street-light they passed, and he said "Man."

When they stopped for another traffic signal at a lighted intersection, he looked carefully and said, "Oh man," with all the emphasis inside him somewhere, and his eyes contracted into two pitying little knots of wrinkles. Horty knew the fat boy was sorry for him, and only then did he begin to cry openly. He wished he could stop, but he couldn't, and didn't while the boy bound up his

hand again and for quite a while afterward.

The fat boy sat back on a new roll of canvas to wait for Horty to calm down. Once Horty subsided a little and the boy winked at him, and Horty, profoundly susceptible to the least kindness, began to wail again. The boy picked up the paper bag, looked into it, grunted, closed it carefully and put it out of the way on the canvas. Then to Horty's astonishment, he removed from his inside coat pocket a large silver cigar case, the kind with five metal cylinders built together, took out a half a cigar, put it all in his mouth and turned it to wet it down, and lit up, surrounding himself with sweet-acrid blue smoke. He did not try to talk, and after a while Horty must have dozed off, because he opened his eyes to find the fat boy's jacket folded as a pillow under his head, and he could not remember its being put there. It was dark then; he sat up, and immediately the fat boy's voice came from the blackness—"Take it easy, kid."

A small pudgy hand steadied Horty's back. "How do you feel?"

Horty tried to talk, choked, swallowed and tried again. "All right, I guess. Hungry...gee! We're out in the country!"

He became conscious of the fat boy squatting beside him. The hand left his back; in a moment the flame of a match startled him, and for an etched moment the boy's face floated before him in the wavering light, moonlike, with delicate pink lips acrawl on the black cigar. Then with a practiced flick of his fingers, he sent the match and its brilliance flying out into the night. "Smoke?"

"I never did smoke," said Horty. "Some corn-silk, once." He looked admiringly at the red jewel at the end

of the cigar. "You smoke a lot, huh."

"Stunts m'growth," said the other, and burst into a peal of shrill laughter. "How's the hand?"

"It hurts some. Not so bad."

"You got a lot of grit, kid. I'd be screamin' for morphine if I was you. What happened to it?"

HORTY TOLD him. The story came out in snatches, out of sequence, but the fat boy got it all. He questioned briefly, and to the point, and did not comment at all. The conversation died after he had asked as many questions as he apparently wanted to, and for a while Horty thought the other had dozed off. The cigar dimmed and dimmed, occasionally sputtering around the edges, once in a while brightening in a wavery fashion as vagrant air touched it from the back of the truck.

Abruptly, and in a perfectly wide-awake voice, the fat boy asked him, "You lookin' fer work?"

"Work? Well—I guess maybe."

"What made you eat them ants?" came next.

"Well, I—I don't know. I guess I just—well, I wanted to."

"Do you do that a lot?"

"Not too much." This was a different kind of questioning than he had had from Armand. The boy asked him about it without revulsion, without any more curiosity, really, than he had asked him how old he was, what grade he was in.

"Can you sing?"

"Well—I guess so. Some."

"Sing something. Sing—uh—*Stardust*. Know it?"

Horty looked out at the starlit highway racing away beneath the rumbling wheels, the blaze of yellow-white which turned to dwindling red tail-light eyes as a car

whisked by on the other side of the road. The fog was gone, and a lot of the pain was gone from his hand, and most of all he was gone from Armand and Tonta. Kay and given him a feather-touch of kindness, and this odd boy, who talked in a way he had never heard a boy talk before, had given him another sort of kindness. There were the beginnings of a wonderful warm glow inside him, a feeling he had had only once or twice before in his whole life—the time he had won the sack-race and they gave him a khaki handkerchief, and the time four kids had whistled to a mongrel dog, and the dog had come straight to him, ignoring the others. He began to sing, and because the truck rumbled so, he had to sing out to be heard; and because he had to sing out, he leaned on the song, giving something of himself to it as a high-steel worker gives part of his weight to the wind.

He finished. The fat boy said "Hey." The unaccented syllable was warm praise. Without any further comment he went to the front of the truck body and thumped on the square pane of glass there. The truck immediately slowed, pulled over and stopped by the roadside. The fat boy went to the tailgate, sat down, and slid off to the road.

"You stay right there," he told Horthy. "I'm gonna ride up front a while. You hear me now—don't go 'way."

"I won't," said Horthy.

"How the hell can you sing like that with your hand mashed?"

"I don't know. It doesn't hurt so much now."

"Do you eat grasshoppers too? Worms?"

"No!" cried Horthy, horrified.

"Okay," said the boy. He went to the cab of the truck; the door

slammed, and the truck ground off again.

Horthy worked his way carefully forward until, squatting by the front wall of the truck-body, he could see through the square pane.

The driver was a tall man with a curious skin, lumpy and grey-green. He had a nose like Junky's, but almost no chin, so that he looked like an aged parrot. He was so tall that he had to curve over the wheel like a fern-frond.

Next to him were two little girls. One had a round bush of white hair (he found out later that it was platinum and the other had two thick ropes of pigtails, bangs, and beautiful teeth.) The fat boy was next to her, talking animatedly. The driver seemed not to pay any attention to the conversation at all.

Horthy's head was not clear, but he did not feel sick either. Everything had an exciting, dreamlike quality. He moved back in the truck body and lay down with his head on the fat boy's jacket. Immediately he sat up, and crawled among the goods stacked in the truck until his hand found the long roll of canvas, moved along it until he found his paper bag. Then he lay down again, his left hand resting easily on his stomach, his right inside the bag, with his index and little fingers resting between Junky's nose and chin. He went to sleep.

CHAPTER III

WHEN HE woke again the truck had stopped, and he opened unfocussed eyes to a writhing glare of light—red and orange, green and blue, with an underlying sheet of dazzling gold.

He raised his head, blinking, and resolved the lights into a massive

post bearing neon signs: ICE CREAM TWENTY FLAVORS, and CABINS and BAR—EAT. The wash of gold came from floodlights over the service area of a gas station. Three tractor-trailer trucks were drawn up behind the fat boy's truck; one of them had its trailer built of heavily-ribbed stainless steel and was very lovely under the lights.

"You awake, kid?"

"Uh—Hi! Yes."

"We're going to grab a bite. Come on."

Horty rose stiffly to his knees. He said, "I haven't got any money."

"Hell with that," said the fat boy. "Come on."

He put a firm hand under Horty's armpit as he climbed down. A juke-box throbbed behind the grinding sound of a gasoline pump, and their feet crunched pleasantly on cinders. "What's your name?" Horty asked.

"They call me Havana," said the fat boy. "I never been there. It's the cigars."

"My name's Horty Bluett."

"We'll change that."

The driver and the two girls were waiting for them by the door of a diner. Horty hardly had a chance to look at them before they all crowded through and lined up at the counter. Horty sat between the driver and the silver-haired girl. The other one, the one with dark ropes of braided hair took the next stool, and Havana, the fat-boy, sat at the end.

Horty looked first at the driver—looked, stared, and dragged his eyes away in the same tense moment. The driver's sagging skin was indeed a grey-green, dry, loose, leather-rough. He had pondulous pouches under his eyes, which were red and inflamed-looking, and his underlip drooped to show long white lower incisors. The backs of his hands showed the same

loose sage-green skin, though his fingers were normal. They were long and the nails were exquisitely manicured.

"That's Solum," said Havana, leaning forward over the counter and talking across the two girls. "He's the Alligator-Skinned Man, an' the ugliest human in captivity." He must have sensed Horty's thought that Solum might resent this designation, for he added, "He's deaf. He don't know what goes on."

"I'm Bunny," said the girl next to him. She was plump—not fat like Havana, but round—butter-ball round, skin-tight round. Her flesh was flesh colored and blood-colored—all pink with no yellow about it. Her hair was as white as cotton, but glossy, and her eyes were the extraordinary ruby of a white rabbit's. She had a little midge of a voice and an all but ultrasonic giggle, which she used now. She stood barely as high as his shoulder, though they sat at the same height. She was out of proportion only in this one fact of the long torso and the short legs. "An' this is Zena."

HORTY TURNED his gaze full on her and gulped. She was the most beautiful little work of art he had ever seen in his life. Her dark hair shone, and her eyes shone too, and her head planed from temple to cheek, curved from cheek to chin, softly and smoothly. Her skin was tanned over a deep, fresh glow like the pink shadows between the petals of a rose. The lipstick she chose was dark, nearly a brown red; that and the dark skin made the whites of her eyes like beacons. She wore a dress with a wide collar that lay back on her shoulders, and a neckline that dropped almost to her waist. That neckline told Horty for the

very first time that these kids, Havana and Bunny and Zena, weren't kids at all. Bunny was girl-curved, puppy-fat curve, the way even a four-year-old girl—or boy—might be. But Zena had breasts, real, taut, firm, separate breasts. He looked at them and then at the three small faces, as if the faces he had seen before had disappeared and were replaced by new ones. Havana's studied, self-assured speech and his cigars were his badges of maturity, and albino Bunny would certainly show some such emblem in a minute.

"I won't tell you his name," said Havana. "He's fixin' to get a new one, as of now. Right, kid?"

"Well," said Horty, still struggling with the strange shifting of estimated place these people had made within him, "Well, I guess so."

"He's cute," said Bunny. "You know that, kid?" She uttered her almost inaudible giggle. "You're cute."

Horty found himself looking at Zena's breasts again and his cheeks flamed. "Don't rib him," said Zena.

It was the first time she had spoken... One of the earliest things Horty could remember was a cat-tail stalk he had seen lying on the bank of a tidal creek. He was only a toddler then, and the dark-brown sausage of the cat-tail fastened to its dry yellow stem had seemed a hard and brittle thing. He had, without picking it up, run his fingers delicately down its length, and the fact that it was not dried wood, but velvet, was a thrilling shock. He had such a shock now, hearing Zena's voice for the first time.

The short-order man, a pasty-faced youth with a tired mouth and laugh-wrinkles around his eyes and nostrils, lounged up to them. He apparently felt no surprise at seeing the mid-gets or the hideous green-skinned So-

lum. "Hi, Havana. You folks setting up around here?"

"Not fer six weeks or so. We're down Eltonville way. We'll milk the State Fair and work back. Comin' in with a load o' props. Cheeseburger fer the glamorpus there. What's yer pleasure, ladies?"

"Scrambled on rye toast," said Bunny.

Zena said, "Fry some bacon until it's almost burned—"

"—an' crumble it over some peanut-butter on whole wheat. I remember, princess," grinned the cook. "What say, Havana?"

"Steak. You too, huh?" he asked Horty. "Nup—he can't cut it. Ground sirloin, an' I'll shoot you if you bread it. Peas an' mashed."

The cook made a circle of his thumb and forefinger and went to get the order.

Horty asked, timidly, "Are you with a circus?"

"Carny," said Havana.

Zena smiled at his expression. It made his head swim. "That's a carnival. You know. Does your hand hurt?"

"Not much."

"That kills me," Havana exploded. "Y'oughta see it." He drew his right hand across his left fingers and made a motion like crumbling crackers. "Man."

"We'll get that fixed up. What are we going to call you?" asked Bunny.

"Let's figure out what he's going to do first," said Havana. "We got to make the Maneater happy."

"About those ants," said Bunny, "would you eat slugs and grasshoppers, and that?" She asked him straight out, and this time she did not giggle.

"No!" said Horty, simultaneously with Havana's "I already asked him that. That's out, Bunny. The Man-

eater don't like to use a geek anyway."

Regretfully, Bunny said, "No carny ever had a midge that would geek. It would be a card."

"What's a geek?" asked Horthy.

"He wants to know what's a geek."

"Nothing very nice," said Zena. "It's a man who eats all sorts of nasty things, and bites the heads off live chickens and rabbits."

HORTY SAID, "I don't think I'd like doing that," so soberly that the three midgets burst into a shrill explosion of laughter. Horthy looked at them all, one by one, and sensed that they laughed with, not at him, and so he laughed too. Again he felt that inward surge of warmth. These folk made everything so easy. They seemed to understand that he could be a little different from other folks, and it was all right. Havana had apparently told them all about him, and they were eager to help.

"I told you," said Havana, "he sings like an angel. Never heard anything like it. Wait'll you hear."

"You play anything?" asked Bunny. "Zena, could you teach him guitar?"

"Not with that hand," said Havana.

"Stop it!" Zena cried. "Just when did you people decide he was going to work with us?"

Havana opened his mouth helplessly. Bunny said, "Oh—I thought..." and Horthy stared at Zena. Were they trying to give and take away all at the same time?

"Oh, kiddo, don't look at me like that," said Zena. "You'll tear me apart..." Again, in spite of his distress, he could all but feel her voice with fingertips. She said, "I'd do anything in the world for you, child. But—it would have to be something

good. I don't know that this would be good."

"Sure it'd be good," scoffed Havana. "Where's he gonna eat? Who's gonna take him in? Listen, after what he's been through he deserves a break. What's the matter with it, Zee? The Maneater?"

"I can handle the Maneater," she said casually. Somehow, Horthy sensed that in that casual remark was the thing about Zena that made the others await her decision. "Look, Havana," she said, "what happens to a kid his age makes him what he will be when he grows up. Carny's all right for us. It's home to us. It's the one place where we can be what we are and like it. What would it be for him, growing up in it? That's no life for a kid."

"You talk as if there was nothing in a carnival but midges and freaks."

"In a way that's so," she murmured. "I'm sorry," she added. "I shouldn't have said that. I can't think straight tonight. There's something..." She shook herself. "I don't know. But I don't think it's a good idea."

Bunny and Havana looked at each other. Havana shrugged helplessly. And Horthy couldn't help himself. His eyes felt hot, and he said "Gee."

"Oh, Kid, don't."

"Hey!" barked Havana. "Grab him! He's fainting!"

Horthy's face was suddenly pale and twisted with pain. Zena slid off her stool and put her arm around him. "Sick, honey? Your hand?"

Gasping, Horthy shook his head. "Junky," he whispered, and grunted as if his windpipe were being squeezed. He pointed with his bandaged hand toward the door. "Truck," he rasped. "In—Junky—oh, truck!"

The midgets looked at one another, and then Havana leaped from his stool and, running to Solum, punched

his arm. He made quick motions, pointing outside, turning an imaginary steering wheel, beckoning toward the door.

MOVING with astonishing speed, the big man wheeled to the door and was gone, the others following. Solum was at the truck almost before the midgets and Horthy were outside. He bounded catlike past the cab, throwing a quick glance into it, and in two more jumps was at the tail gate and inside. There were a couple of thumps and Solum emerged, the tattered figure of a highway bum dangling from his parti-colored hands. The tramp was struggling wildly, but when the brilliant golden light fell on Solum's face, he uttered a scratchy ululation which must have been clearly audible a quarter of a mile away. Solum dropped him on to the cinders; he landed heavily on his back and lay there writhing and terrified, fighting to get wind back into his shocked lungs.

Havana threw away his cigar stub and pounced on the prone figure, roughly going through the pockets. He said something unprintable and then, "Look here—our new soup-spoons and four compacts and a lipstick and—why, you little sneak," he snarled at the man, who was not large but was nearly three times his size. The man twitched as if he would throw Havana off him; Solum immediately leaned down and raked a large hand across his face. The man screamed again, and this time did surge up and send Havana flying: not, however, to attack, but to run sobbing and slobbering with fear from the gaunt Solum. He disappeared into the darkness across the highway with Solum at his heels.

Horthy went to the tailgate. He said,

timidly, to Havana, "Would you look for my package?"

"That ol' paper bag? Sure." Havana swung up on the tailgate, reappeared a moment later with the bag, and handed it to Horthy.

"Gee," said Horthy. "Junky. He's all busted." He drew out the two pieces of the hideous face. The nose was crushed to a coarse powder of papier-mache, and the face was cracked in two, a large piece and a small piece. There was an eye in each, glittering. "Gee," Horthy said again, trying to fit them together with one hand.

Havana, busy gathering up the loot, said over his shoulder, "'Sa damn shame, kid. The guy must've put his knee on it while he was goin' through our stuff." He tossed the odd collection of purchases into the cab of the truck while Horthy wrapped Junky up again. "Let's go back inside. Our order'll be up."

"What about Solum?" asked Horthy. "He'll be along."

Horthy was conscious, abruptly, that Zena's deep eyes were fixed on him. He almost spoke to her, didn't know what to say, flushed in embarrassment, and led the way into the restaurant. Zena sat beside him this time. She leaned across him for the salt, and whispered, "How did you know someone was in the truck?"

Horthy settled his paper bag in his lap, and saw her eyes on it as he did so. "Oh," she said; and then in quite a different tone, slowly, "Oh-h." He knew he need not answer.

Solum followed them in almost immediately. He dusted his hands off in an exaggerated gesture, and grinned—quite the most horrible sight Horthy had ever seen. Then his face relaxed completely; it slumped; and he began to eat, putting small mouthfuls rapidly into his huge jaws.

"How did you know there was



someone out there?" demanded Havana, busy with a catsup bottle.

Horty began to speak, but Zena interrupted. "I've changed my mind," she said suddenly. "I think carny can do the kid more good than harm. It's better than making his way on the outside."

"Well now." Havana put down the bottle and beamed. Bunny clapped her hands. "Good, Zee! I knew you'd see it."

"I saw—that," said Zena, pointing.

"Coffee urn?" said Havana stupidly. "Toaster?"

"The mirror, silly. Will you look?"

She leaned close to Horty and put her arm around his head, drawing their two faces together. The reflection looked back at them—small faces, both brown, both deep-eyed, oval, dark-haired. If Horty were wearing lipstick and braids, his face would have been different from hers—but very little.

"Your long-lost brother!" breathed Bunny.

"My sister," said Zena flatly. "Look—there are two bunks in my end of the wagon...stop that cackling, Bunny; I'm old enough to be his mother and besides—oh, shut up. No; this is the perfect way to do it. The Maneater never has to know who he is. It's up to you two."

"We won't say anything," said Havana.

Solum kept on eating.

Horty asked, "Who's the Maneater?"

"The boss," said Bunny. "He used to be a doctor. He'll fix up your hand."

Zena's eyes looked at something that was not in the room. "He hates people," she said. "All people."

Horty was startled. This was the first indication among these odd folk that there might be something to be

afraid of. Zena, understanding, touched his arm. "Don't be afraid. His way of hating people won't hurt you."

CHAPTER IV

THEY REACHED the carnival in the dark part of the morning; when the distant hills had just begun to separate themselves from the paling sky.

To Horty it was all thrilling and mysterious. Not only had he met these people, but there was also the excitement and mystery ahead, and the way of starting it, the game he must play, the lines he must never forget. And now, at dawn, the carnival itself. The wide dim street, paved with wood shavings, seemed faintly luminous between the rows of stands and bally-platforms. Here a dark neon tube made ghosts of random light rays from the growing dawn; there one of the rides stretched hungry arms upward in bony silhouette. There were sounds, sleepy, restless, alien sounds; and the place smelled of damp earth, popcorn, perspiration, and sweet exotic manures.

The truck threaded its way behind the western row of midway stands and came to a stop by a long house-trailer with doors at each end.

"Home," yawned Bunny. Horty was riding in front with the girls now, and Havana had curled up in the back. "Out you get. Scoot, now; right into that doorway. The Maneater'll be asleep, and no one will see you. When you come out you'll be somebody different, and then we'll go fix your hand up."

Horty stood on the truck step, glanced around, and then arrowed to the door of the trailer and skinned inside. It was dark there. He stood

clear of the door and waited for Zena to come in, close it, and draw the curtains on the small windows before turning on the lights.

The light seemed very bright when it blinked on. Horty found himself in a small square room. There was a tiny bunk on each side, a compact kitchenette in one corner, and what appeared to be a closet in the other.

"All right," said Zena, "take off your clothes."

"All of 'em?"

"Of course, all of them." She saw his startled face, and laughed. "Listen, Kiddo. I'll tell you something about us little people. Uh—how old did you say you were?"

"I'm almost nine."

"Well, I'll try. Ordinary grown up people are very careful about seeing each other without clothes. Whether or not it makes any sense, they are that way because there's a big difference between men and women when they're grown up. More than between boys and girls. Well, a midget stays like a child, in most ways, all his life except for maybe a couple of years. So a lot of us don't let such things bother us. As for us, you and I, we might as well make up our minds right now that it's not going to make any difference. In the first place, no one but Bunny and Havana and me know you're a boy. In the second place, this little room is just too small for two people to live in if they're going to be stooping and cringing and hiding from each other because of something that doesn't matter. See?"

"I—I guess so."

She helped him out of his clothes, and he began his careful education on how to be a woman from the skin outward.

"Tell me something, Horty," she said, as she turned out a neat drawer,

looking for clothes for him. "What's in the paper bag?"

"That's Junky. It's a jack-in-the-box. It was, I mean. Armand busted it—I told you. Then the man in the truck busted it more."

"Could I see?"

Worrying into a pair of her socks, he nodded toward one of the bunks. "Go ahead."

SHE LIFTED out the tattered bits of papier-mache. "Two of them!" she exploded. She turned and looked at Horty as if he had turned bright purple, or sprouted rabbit's ears. "Two!" she said again. "Are these really yours? Both of them?"

"They're Junky's eyes," he explained.

"Where did Junky come from?"

"I had him before I was adopted. A policeman found me when I was a baby. I was put in a Home. I got Junky there. I guess I never had any folks."

"And Junky stayed with you—here, let me help you into that—Junk stayed with you from then on?"

"Yes. He had to."

"Why had to?"

"How do you hook this?"

Zena checked what seemed to be an impulse to push him into a corner and hold him still until she extracted the information from him. "About Junky," she said patiently.

"Oh. Well, I just had to have him near me. No, not near me. I could go a long way away as long as Junky was all right. As long as he was mine, I mean. I mean, if I didn't even see him for a year it was all right, but if somebody moved him, I knew it, and if somebody hurt him, I hurt too. See?"

"Indeed I do," said Zena surprisingly. Again Horty felt that sweet shock of delight; these people

seemed to understand everything so well.

Horty said, "I used to think everybody had something like that. Something they'd be sick if they lost it, like. I never thought to ask anyone about it, even. And then Armand, he picked on me about Junky. He used to hide Junky to get me excited. Once he put him on a garbage truck. I got so sick I had to have a doctor. I kept yelling for Junky, until the doctor told Armand to get this Junky back to me or I would die. Said it was a fix something. Ation."

"A fixation. I know the routine," Zena smiled.

"Armand, he was mad, but he had to do it. So anyway he got tired of fooling with Junky, and put him in the top of the closet and forgot about him pretty much."

"You look like a regular dream-girl," said Zena admiringly. She put her hands on his shoulders and looked gravely into his eyes. "Listen to me. Horty. This is very important. It's about the Maneater. You're going to see him in a few minutes, and—"

"I remember everything you told me, about I'm your half-sister and a man put my hand in a vise and all that."

"Good. Gosh, honey, I'm sorry to give you so many things to think of at once! No; this is something just between us. First of all, you must never, never let the Maneater know about Junky. We'll find a place for him here, and I don't want you to ever talk about him again, except to me. Promise?"

Wide eyed, Horty nodded. "Uh huh."

"Good. And one more thing, just as important. The Maneater's going to fix your hand. Don't worry; he's a good doctor. But I want you to push every bit of old bandage, every

little scrap of cotton he uses, over toward me if you can, without letting him notice it. I don't want you to leave a drop of your blood in his trailer, understand? Not a drop. I'm going to offer to clean up for him—he'll be glad; he hates to do it—and you help me as much as you can. All right?"

Horty promised. Bunny and Havana pounded just then. Horty went out first, holding his bad hand behind him, and they called him Zena, and Zena pirouetted out, laughing, while they goggled at Horty. Havana dropped his cigar and said "Hey.

"Zee, he's beautiful!" cried Bunny.

Zena held up a tiny forefinger. "She's beautiful, and don't you forget it."

"I feel awful funny," said Horty, twitching his skirt.

"Where on earth did you get that dress?"

"Bought it and never wore it, said Zena. "It won't fit my chest expansion...Come on, kids. Let's go wake the Maneater."

They made their way among the wagons. "Take smaller steps," said Zena. "That's better. You remember everything?"

"I—guess so. You mean all you told me about living in Millboro and all."

"That's right. And if he should ask a question and you don't know, just smile. I'll be right beside you."

A LONG SILVER trailer was parked next to a tent bearing a brilliantly colored poster of a man in a top-hat. He had long pointed mustachios and zig-zags of lightning came from his eyes. Below it, in flaming letters, was the legend

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Mephisto Knows.

"His name isn't Mephisto," said

Bunny. "It's Monetre. He used to be a doctor before he was a carny. Everyone calls him Maneater. He don't mind."

Havana pounded on the door. "Hey, Maneater! Y'going to sleep all afternoon?"

"You're fired," growled the silver trailer.

"Okay," said Havana casually. "Come on out and see what we got."

"Not if you want to put it on the payroll," said the sleepy voice. There were movements inside. Bunny pushed Horthy over near the door and waved to Zena to hide. Zena flattened against the trailer wall.

The door opened. The man who stood there was tall, cadaverous, with hollows in his cheeks and a long bluish jaw. His eyes seemed, in the early morning light, to be just inch-deep black sockets in his head. "What is it?"

Bunny pointed at Horthy. "Maneater, who's that?"

"Who's that?" He peered. "Zena, of course. Good morning, Zena," he said, his tone suddenly courtly.

"Good morning," laughed Zena, dancing out from behind the door.

The Maneater stared from Zena to Horthy and back. "Oh, my aching bankroll," he said. "A sister act. And if I don't hire her you'll quit. And Bunny and Havana will quit."

"A mind-reader," said Havana, nudging Horthy.

"What's your name, kid sister?"

"My pa named me Hortense," recited Horthy correctly. "but everyone calls me Kiddo."

"I don't blame them," said the Maneater in a kindly voice. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Kiddo. I'm going to call your bluff. Get off the lot, and if the rest of you don't like it, you can go along with her. If I don't see any of you on the midway

at eleven o'clock this morning, I'll know what you decided." He closed the door softly and with great firmness.

"Oh—gee!" said Horthy.

"It's all right," grinned Havana. "He don't mean it. He fires everybody 'most every day. When he means it he pays 'em. Go get 'im, Zee."

Zena rippled her knuckles on the aluminum door. "Mister Maneater!" she sang.

"I'm counting your pay," said the voice from inside.

"Oh-oh," said Havana.

"Please. Just a minute," cried Zena.

The door opened up again. The Maneater had one hand full of money. "Well?"

Horthy heard Bunny mutter, "Do good, Zee. Do good!"

Zena beckoned to Horthy. He stepped forward hesitantly. "Kiddo, show him your hand."

Horthy extended his ruined hand. Zena peeled off the soiled, bloody handkerchiefs one by one. The inner one was stuck fast; Horthy whimpered as she disturbed it. Enough could be seen, however, to show the Maneater's trained eye that three fingers were gone completely and the rest of the hand in a bad way.

"How in creation did you do a thing like this, girl?" he barked. Horthy fell back, frightened.

"Kiddo, go over there with Havana, hm?"

HORTHY RETREATED, gratefully. Zena began talking rapidly in a low voice. He could only hear part of it. "Terrible shock, Maneater. Don't remind her of it, ever...carpenter...and took her to his shop...when she...and her hand in the vise."

"No wonder I hate people," the Maneater snarled. He asked her a question.

"No," said Zena. "She got away, but her hand..."

"Come here, Kiddo," said the Maneater. His face was something to see. His whip of a voice seemed to issue from his nostrils which, suddenly, were not carven slits but distended, circular holes. Horty turned pale.

Havana pushed him gently. "Go on, Kiddo. He's not mad. He's sorry for you. Go on!"

Horty inched forward and timidly climbed the step. "Come in here."

"We'll see you," called Havana. He and Bunny turned away. As the door closed behind him and Zena, Horty looked back and saw Bunny and Havana gravely shaking hands.

"Sit down there," said the Maneater.

The inside of his trailer was surprisingly spacious. There was a bed across the front end, partially curtained. There was a neat galley, a shower, and a safe; a large table, cabinets, and more books than one would ever expect to fit into such space.

"Does it hurt?" murmured Zena.

"Not much."

"Don't you worry about that," growled the Maneater. He put alcohol, cotton, and a hypodermic case on the table. "Tell you what I'm going to do. (Just to be different from other doctors.) I'm going to block the nerve on your whole arm. When I poke the needle into you it'll hurt, like a bee-sting. Then your arm will feel very funny, as if it were a balloon being blown up. Then I'll clean up that hand. It won't hurt."

Horty smiled up at him. There was something in this man, with his frightening changes of voice and his treacherous humor, his kindness and his cruel aura, which the boy found deeply appealing. There was a kindness like Kay's, little Kay who hadn't cared if he ate ants. And there was

a cruelty like Armand Bluett's. If nothing else, the Maneater would serve as a link with the past for Horty—for a while at least. "Go ahead," said Horty.

"That's a good girl."

The Maneater bent to his work, with Zena, fascinated, looking on, deftly moving things out of his way, making things more convenient for him. So absorbed he became that if he had any further questions to ask about "Kiddo" he forgot them.

Zena cleaned up afterward.

CHAPTER V

PIERRE MONETRE had graduated from college three days before he was sixteen, and from medical school when he was twenty-one. A man died under his hands during a simple appendectomy, which was not Pierre Monetre's fault. He then began to drink. He took his drunkenness before the world as he had taken his brilliance and his skill—front and center, and damn the comments. The comments on his brilliance and his skill had helped him. The comments on his drunkenness shut him out.

He got over the drunkenness; alcoholism is not a disease, but a symptom. There are two ways of disposing of alcoholism. One is to cure the disorder which causes it. The other is to substitute some other symptom for it. That was Pierre Monetre's way.

He chose to despise the men who had shut him out, and let himself despise the rest of humanity because it was kin to those men.

He enjoyed his disgust. He built himself a pinnacle of hatred and stood on it to sneer at the world. This gave him all the altitude he needed at the time. He starved while he did it; but since riches were of value to the

world at which he sneered, he enjoyed his poverty too. For a while.

But a man with such an attitude is like a child with a whip—or a nation with battleships. For a while it is sufficient to stand in the sun, with one's power in plain sight for all to see. Soon, however, the whip must whistle and crack, the rifles must thunder, the man must take more than a stand; he must take action.

Pierre Monetre worked for a while with subversive groups. It was of no importance to him which group, or what it stood for, as long as its aim was to tear down the current structure of the majority. He did not confine this to politics, but also did what he could to introduce modern non-objective art into traditional galleries, agitated for atonal music in string quartets, poured beef-extract on the serving tables of a vegetarian restaurant, and made a score of other stupid, petty rebellions.

His disgust meanwhile, fed on itself, until it was neither stupid nor petty. Again he found himself at a loss for a means of expressing it. He grew increasingly bitter as his clothes wore out, as he was forced out of one sordid garret after another. He never blamed himself, but felt victimized by humanity—a humanity that was, part and parcel, inferior to him. And suddenly he was given what he wanted.

He had to eat. All his corrosive hatreds focussed there. There was no escaping it, and for a while there was no means of eating except doing work which would be of some value to some part of humanity. This galled him, but there was no other way of inducing humanity to pay him for his work. So he turned to a phase of his medical training and got a job in a biological laboratory doing

cellular analyses. His hatred of mankind could not change the characteristics of his interested, inquiring brilliant mind; he loved the work, hating only the fact that it benefited people—employers, their clients, (who were mostly doctors and their patients.)

He lived in a house—an ex-stable—near the edge of a small town, where he could take long walks by himself in the woods and think his strange thoughts. Only a man who had consciously turned away, for years, from everything human would have noticed what he had noticed one fall afternoon, or would have had the curiosity to examine it. Only a man with his unusual combination of training and ability would have had the equipment to explain it. And certainly, only such a social monster could have used it as he did.

He saw two trees.

EACH WAS a tree like any other tree—an oak sapling, twisted from some early accident, young and alive. Never in a thousand years would he have noticed either of them, particularly, had he seen it alone. But he saw them together; his eye swept over them, he raised his eyebrows in slight surprise and walked on. Then he stopped and went back and stood staring at them. And suddenly he grunted as if he had been kicked, and went between the trees—they were twenty feet apart—and gaped from one to the other.

The trees were the same size. Each had a knotted primary limb snaking off to the north. Each had a curling scar on the first shoot from it. The first cluster on the primary on each tree had five leaves on it.

Monetre went and stood closer, running his gaze from tree to tree, up and down, one, then the other.

What he saw was impossible. The law of averages permits of such a thing as two absolutely identical trees, but at astronomical odds. Impossible was the working word for such a statistic.

Monetre reached and pulled down a leaf from one tree, and from the other took down its opposite number.

They were identical—veining, shape, size, texture.

That was enough for Monetre. He grunted again, looked searchingly around to fix the location in his mind, and headed back to his shack at a dead run.

Far into the night he labored over the oak leaves. He stared through a magnifying glass until his eyes ached. He made solutions of what he had in the house—vinegar, sugar, salt, a little phenol—and marinated parts of the leaves. He dyed corresponding parts of them with diluted ink.

What he found out about them checked and double-checked when he took them to the laboratory in the morning. Qualitative and quantitative analysis, volumetric and kindling temperature and specific gravity tests, spectrographics and pH ratings they all said the same thing; these two leaves were incredibly and absolutely identical.

Feverishly, in the months that followed, Monetre worked on parts of the trees. His working microscopes told the same story; he talked his employer into letting him use the 300-power mike which the lab kept in a bell-jar, and it said the same thing. The trees were identical, not leaf for leaf, but cell for cell. Bark and cambium and heartwood, they were the same.

It was his own incessant sampling

which gave him his next lead. He took his specimens from the trees after the most meticulous measurements. A core-drill "take" from Tree A was duplicated on Tree B, to the fractional millimeter. And one day Monetre positioned his drill on both trees, got his sample from Tree A, and broke his drill.

He blamed it, of course, on the drill, and therefore on the men who made it, and therefore on all men; and he fumed home, happily in his own ground.

But when he came back the next day he found a hole in Tree B, exactly on the corresponding spot to his tap on Tree A.

He stood with his fingers on the inexplicable hole, and for a long moment his active mind was at a complete stop. Then, carefully, he took out his knife and cut a cross in Tree A, and, in the same place on Tree B, a triangle. He cut them deep and clear, and went home again to read more esoteric books on cell structure.

When he returned to the forest, he found both trees bearing a cross.

He made many more tests. He cut odd shapes in each tree. He painted swatches of color on them. He found that overlays, like paint and nailed-on pieces of board, remained as he applied them. But anything affecting the structure of the tree—a cut or scrape or laceration or puncture—was repeated, from Tree A to Tree B.

Tree A was the original. Tree B was some sort of a...copy.

PIERRE MONETRE worked on Tree B for two years before he found out, with the aid of an electron microscope, that aside from the function of exact duplication, Tree B was different. In the nucleus of each cell of Tree B was a single giant molecule, akin to the hydro-carbon enz-

ymes, which could transmute elements. Three cells removed from a piece of bark or leaf-tissue meant three cells replaced within an hour. The freak enzyme, depleted, would then rest for an hour or two, and slowly begin to restore itself, atom by captured atom, from the surrounding tissue.

The control of restoration in damaged tissue is a subtle business at its simplest. Any biologist can give a lucid description of what happens when cells begin to rebuild—what metabolistic factors are present, what oxygen exchange occurs, how fast and how large and for what purpose new cells are developed. But they cannot tell you *why*. They cannot say what gives the signal, "Start!" to a half-ruined cell, and what says "stop." They know that cancer is a malfunction of this control mechanism, but what the mechanism is they do not say. This is true of normal tissue.

But what of Pierre Monetre's Tree B? It never restored itself normally. It restored itself only to duplicate Tree A. Notch a twig of Tree A. Break off the corresponding twig of Tree B and take it home. For twelve to fourteen hours, that twig would work on the laborious process of reforming itself to be notched. After that it would stop, and be an ordinary piece of wood. Return then to Tree B, and you would find another restored twig, and this one with its notch perfectly duplicated.

Here even Pierre Monetre's skill bogged down. Cell regeneration is a mystery. Cell duplication is a step beyond an unfathomable enigma. But somewhere, somehow, this fantastic duplication was controlled, and Monetre doggedly set about finding what did it. He was a savage, hearing a radio and searching for the signal

source. He was a dog, hearing his master cry out in pain because a girl wrote that she did not love him. He saw the result, and he tried, without adequate tools, without the capacity to understand it if it were thrust under his nose, to determine the cause.

A fire did it for him.

The few people who knew him by sight—none knew him any other way—were astonished that he joined the volunteer fire-fighters that autumn, when the smoke blasted through the hills driven by a flame-whipped wind. And for years there was a legend about the skinny feller who fought the fire like a soul promised release from hell. They told about cutting the new fire-trail, and how the skinny feller threatened to kill the forest ranger if he did not move his fire line a hundred yards north of where it had been planned. The skinny feller made history with his battle of the back-blaze, watering it with his very sweat to keep it out of a certain patch of wood. And when the fire advanced to the edge of the back-blaze, and the men broke and fled before it, the skinny feller was not with them, but stayed, crouched in the smoking moss between two oak saplings, with a spade and an axe in his bleeding hands and a fire in his eyes hotter than any that ever touched a tree. They saw all of that—

They did not see Tree B begin to tremble. Their eyes were not with Monetre's, to peer through heat and smoke and the agonized cloud of exhaustion which hovered around him, and see the scientist's mind reaching out unbidden to seize on the fact that the shuddering of Tree B was timed exactly with the rolling flames over a clearing a hundred and fifty feet away.

He watched it, red-eyed. Flame

touched the rocky clearing, and the tree shivered. Flame tugged the earth like hair in a hurricane pulling a head, and when the fire wavered and streamed upward, Tree B stood firm. But when a tortured gust of cold air rushed in to fill the heat-born vacuum, and was pursued along the ground by fingers of fire, the tree shook and tensed, wavered and trembled.

Monetre dragged his half-flayed body to the clearing and watched the flames. A spear of red-orange there; the tree stood firm. A lick of a fiery tongue here, and the tree moved.

So he found it, in the middle of a basalt outcropping. He turned over a rock with fingers which sizzled when they touched it, and under it he found a jewel. He thrust it under his armpit and staggered, tottered, back to his trees, which were now in a small island built of earth and sweat and fire by his own demoniac energy, and he collapsed between the oak saplings while the fire roared past him.

JUST BEFORE dawn he staggered through a nightmare, a spitting, dying inferno, to his house, and hid the jewel. He dragged himself a quarter of a mile further toward the town before he collapsed. He regained consciousness in the hospital and immediately began demanding to be released. First they refused, next they tied him to his bed, and finally he left, at night, through the window, to be with his jewel.

Perhaps it was because he was at the ragged edge of insanity, or because the fusion between his conscious and unconscious minds was almost complete. More likely it was because he was peculiarly equipped, with that driving, searching mind of his. Certainly few, if any, men had

ever done it before, but he did it. He established a contact with the jewel.

He did it with the bludgeon of his hatred. The jewel winked passively at him through all his tests—all that he dared give it. He had to be careful, once he found out that it was alive. His microscope told him that; it was not a crystal, but a super-cooled liquid. It was a single cell, with a faceted wall. The solidified fluid inside was a colloid, with an index of refraction like that of polystyrene, and there was a complex nucleus which he did not understand.

His eagerness quarreled with his caution; he dared not run excessive heat, corrosion, and bombardment tests on it. Wildly frustrated, he sent to it a blast of the refined hatred which he had developed over the years, and the thing—screamed.

There was no sound. It was a pressure in his mind. There was no word, but the pressure was an agonized negation, a "no"-flavored impulse.

Pierre Monetre sat stunned at his battered table, staring out of the dark of his room at the jewel, which he had placed in the pool of light under a gooseneck lamp. He leaned forward and narrowed his eyes, and with complete honesty—for he had a ravening dislike of anything which bid to defy his understanding—he sent out the impulse again.

"No!"

The thing reacted, by that soundless cry, as if he had prodded it with a hot pin.

He thought, hard.

There was an unnatural tree, and it had been connected, in some way, with this buried jewel, a hundred and fifty feet away; for when flame came near the jewel, the tree trembled. When he flicked the jewel with the flame of his hatred, it reacted.



Could the jewel have *built* that tree, with the other as a model? But how? *How?*

"Never mind how," he muttered. He'd find that out in good time. He could hurt the thing. Laws and punishment hurt; oppression hurts; power is the ability to inflict pain. This fantastic object would do what he wanted it to do or he would flog it to death.

He caught up a knife and ran outside. By the light of a waning moon he dug up a sprig of basil which grew near the old stable and planted it in a coffee can. In a similar can he put earth. Bringing them inside, he planted the jewel in the second can.

He composed himself at the table, gathering a particular strength. He had known that he had an extraordinary power over his own mind; in a way he was like a contortionist, who can make a shoulder muscle, or a thigh or part of an arm, jump and twitch individually. He did a thing like turning an electronic instrument, with his brain. He channeled his mental energy into the specific "wave-length" which hurt the jewel, and suddenly, shockingly, spewed it out.

Again and again he struck out at the jewel. Then he let it rest while he tried to bring into the cruel psychic blows some directive command. He visualized the drooping basil shrub, picturing it in the second can.

Grow one.

Copy that.

Make another.

Grow one.

Repeatedly he slashed and slugged the jewel with the order. He could all but hear it whimper. Once he detected, deep in his mind, a kaleidoscopic flicker of impressions—the oak tree, the fire, a black, star-studded

emptiness, a triangle cut into bark. It was brief, and nothing like it was repeated for a long time, but Mone-tre was sure that the impressions had come from the jewel; that it was protesting something.

It gave in; he could feel it surrender. He bludgeoned it twice more for good measure, and went to bed.

In the morning he had two identical basil plants.

CHAPTER VI

CARNIVAL life plodded steadily along, season holding the tail of the season before. The years held three things for Horty. They were—belonging; Zena; and a light with a shadow.

After the Maneater tixed up his—"her"—hand, and the pink scar-tissue came in, the new midget was accepted. Perhaps it was the radiation of willingness, the delighted, earnest desire to fit in and to be of real value that did it, and perhaps it was a quirk or a carelessness on the Maneater's part, but Horty stayed.

In the carnival the pinheads and the roustabouts, the barkers and their shills, the dancers and fireaters and snake-men and ride mechanics, the layout and advance men, had something in common which transcended color and sex and racial and age differences. They were carny, all of them, interested in gathering their tips and turning them—which is carnivalese for collecting a crowd and persuading it to file past the ticket-taker—for this, and for this alone, they worked. And Horty was a part of it.

Horty's voice was a part of Zena's in their act, which followed Bets and Bertha, another sister team with a total poundage in the seven hundreds. Billed as The Little Sisters, Zena and Kiddo came on with a hil-

arious burlesque of the preceding act, and then faded to one of their own, a clever song-and-dance routine which ended in a bewildering vocal—a harmonizing yodel. Kiddo's voice was clear and true, and blended like keys on an organ with Zena's full contralto. They also worked in the Kiddie's Village, a miniature town with its own fire station, city hall, and restaurants, all child-size; adults not admitted. Kiddo served weak tea and cookies to the round-eyed, freckle-faced moppets at the country fairs, and felt part of their wonder and part of their belief in this magic town. Part of...part of...it was a deep-down, thrilling theme to everything that Kiddo did; Kiddo was part of Horty, and Horty was part of the world, for the first time in his life.

Their forty trucks wound among the Rockies and filed out along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, snorted into the Ottawa Fairgrounds and blended themselves into the Fort Worth Exposition. Once, when he was ten, Horty helped the giant Bets bring her child into the world, and thought nothing of it, since it was so much a part of the expected-unexpected of being a carny. Once a pinhead, a happy, brainless dwarf who sat gurgling and chuckling with joy in a corner of the freak show, died in Horty's arms after drinking lye, and the scar in Horty's memory of that frightening scarlet mouth and the pained and puzzled eyes—that scar was a part of Kiddo, who was Horty, who was part of the world.

AND THE second thing was Zena, who was hands for him, eyes for him, a brain for him until he got into the swing of things, until he learned to be, with utter naturalness, a girl midget. It was Zena who made him belong, and his starved ego

soaked it up. She read to him, dozens of books, dozens of kinds of books, in that deep, expressive voice which quite automatically took the parts of all the characters in a story. She led him, with her guitar and her phonograph records, into music. Nothing he learned changed him; but nothing he learned was forgotten. For Horty-Kiddo had eidetic memory.

Havana used to say it was a pity about that hand. Zena and Kiddo wore black gloves in their act, which seemed a little odd; and besides, it would have been nice if they both played guitar. But of course that was out of the question. Sometimes Havana used to remark to Bunny, at night, that Zena was going to wear her fingers plumb off if she played all day on the bally-platform and all night to amuse Horty; for the guitar would cry and ring for hours after they bedded down. Bunny would say sleepily that Zena knew what she was doing—which was, of course, perfectly true.

But the things Horty treasured most were the drowsy conversations in the dark, sometimes on a silent fairgrounds after hours, sometimes bumping along a moonwashed road.

"Horty—" (She was the only one who called him Horty. No one else heard her do it. It was like a private pet-name.)

"Mmm?"

"Can't you sleep?"

"Thinkin'..."

"Thinking about your childhood sweetheart"

"How'd you know? Uh—don't kid me, Zee."

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey."

Horty said into the darkness, "Kay was the only one who ever said anything nice to me, Zee. The only one. It wasn't only that night I ran away. Sometimes in school she'd just smile, that's all. I—I used to wait for it.

"You're laughing at me."

"No, Kiddo, I'm not. You're so sweet."

"Well," he said defensively, "I like to think about her sometimes."

He did think about Kay Hallowell, and often; for this was the third thing, the light with a shadow. The shadow was Armand Bluett. He could not think of Kay without thinking of Armand, though he tried not to. But sometimes the cold wet eyes of a tattered mongrel in some farmyard, or the precise, heralding sound of a key in a Yale lock, would bring Armand and Armand's flat sarcasm and Armand's hard and ready hands right into the room with him. Zena knew of this, which is why she always laughed at him when he mentioned Kay...

He learned so much in those somnolent talks. About the Maneater, for example. "How'd he ever get to be a carny, Zee?"

"I can't say exactly. Sometimes I think he hates carny. He seems to despise the people who come in, and I guess he's in the business mostly because it's the only way he can keep his—" She fell silent.

"What, Zee?"

She was quiet until he spoke again. "He has some people he—thinks a lot of," she explained at length. "Sol-lum. Gogol, the Fish Boy. Little Pennie was one of them." Little Pennie was the pinhead who had drunk lyc. "A few others. And some of the animals. The two-legged cat, and the Cyclops. He—likes to be near them. He kept some of them, I think, before he got into show business. But it must have cost a lot. This way, he can make money out of them."

"Why does he like them, 'special-ly'?"

She turned restlessly. "He's the same kind they are," she breathed. Then, "Horty, don't ever show him

your hand!"

Horty was going to ask about that, but sensed that he should not, and went to sleep.

ONE NIGHT in Wisconsin something woke Horty.

Come here.

It wasn't a sound. It wasn't in words. It was a call. There was a cruel quality to it. Horty lay still.

Come here, come here. Come! Come!

Horty sat up. He heard the prairie wind, and the crickets.

Come! This time it was different. There was a coruscating blaze of anger in it. It was controlled and directive, and had in it a twinge of the pleasure of an Armand Bluett in catching a boy in an inarguable wrong. Horty swung out of bed and stood up, gasping.

"Horty? Horty—what is it?" Zena came sliding out of the dim whiteness of her sheets like the dream of a seal in surf.

"I'm supposed to—go," he said with difficulty.

"What is it?" she whispered tensely. "Like a voice inside you?"

He nodded. The furious command struck him again, and he twisted his face.

"Don't go," Zena whispered. "You hear me, Horty? Don't you move." She spun into a robe. "You get back into bed. Hold on tight; whatever you do, don't leave this trailer. The—it will stop. I promise you it will stop quickly." She pressed him back to his bunk. "Don't you go, now, no matter what happens."

Blinded, stunned by this urgent, painful pressure, he sank back on the bunk. The call flared again within him; he started up. "Zee—" But she was gone. He stood up, his head in his hands, and then remembered the furious urgency of her orders, and

sat down again.

It came again and was—incomplete. Interrupted.

He sat quite still and felt for it with his mind, timidly, as if he were tonguing a sensitive tooth. It was gone. Exhausted, he fell back and went to sleep.

In the morning Zena was back. He had not heard her come in. When he asked her where she had been, she gave him a curious look and said, "Out." So he did not ask her anything more. But at breakfast with Bunny and Havana, she suddenly gripped his arm, taking advantage of a moment when the others had left the table to stove and toaster. "Horty! If you ever get a call like that again, wake me. Wake me right away, you hear?" She was so fierce he was frightened; he had only time to nod before the others came back. He never forgot it. And after that, there were not many times when he woke her and she slipped out, wordlessly, to come back hours later; for when he realized the calls were not for him, he no longer felt them.

The seasons passed and the carnival grew. The Maneater was still everywhere in it, flogging the roustabouts and the animal men, the daredevils and the drivers, with his weapon—his contempt, which he carried about openly like a naked sword.

The carnival grew—larger. Bunny and Havana grew—older, and so did Zena, in subtle ways. But Horty did not grow at all.

He—she—was a fixture now, with a clear soprano voice and black gloves. He passed with the Maneater, who withheld his contempt in saying "Good Morning"—a high favor—and who had little else to say. But Horty-Kiddo was loved by the rest, in the earnest, slap-dash way peculiar to carnies.

The show was a flat-car rig now, with press-agents and sky-tweeping searchlights, a dance pavilion and complicated, epicyclic rides. A national magazine had run a long picture story on the outfit, with emphasis on its "Strange People" ("Freak Show" being an unpopular phrase.) There was a press office now, and there were managers, and annual re-bookings from big organizations. There were public-address systems for the bally-platforms, and newer—not new, but newer—trailers for the personnel.

The Maneater had long since abandoned his mind-reading act, and, increasingly, was a presence only to those working on the lot. In the magazine stories, he was a "partner", if mentioned at all. He was seldom interviewed and never photographed. He spent his working hours with his staff, and stalking about the grounds, and his free time with his books and his rolling laboratory and his "Strange People". There were stories of his being found in the dark hours of the morning, standing in the breathing blackness with his hands behind him and his gaunt shoulders stooped, staring at Gogol in his tank, or peering over the two-headed snake or the hairless rabbit. Watchmen and animal men had learned to keep away from him at such times; they withdrew silently, shaking their heads, and left him alone.

"ZEE..."
"Mmm?"

"Had a talk with the Maneater today while they were setting up our tent."

"What'd he say?"

"Just small-talk. He said the rubes like our act. Guess that's as near as he can get to saying he likes it himself."

"He doesn't," said Zena with certainty. "Anything else?"

"He asked to see my hand."

She sat bolt upright in her bunk. "He didn't!"

"I told him it didn't give me any trouble. Gosh—when was it that he fixed it? Seven years ago? Eight?"

"Did you show it to him?"

"Cool down, Zee! No, I didn't. I said I had to fix some costumes, and got away. But he called after me and said to come to his lab before ten tomorrow. I'm just trying to think of some way to duck it."

"I was afraid of this," she said, her voice shaking. She put her arms around her knees, resting her chin on them.

"It'll be all right, Zee," said Horthy sleepily. "I'll think of something. Maybe he'll forget."

"He won't forget. He has a mind like an adding machine. He won't attach any importance to it until you don't show up; then, look out!"

"Well, s'pose I do show it to him."

"I've told you and told you, Horthy, you must *never* do that!"

"All right, all right. —Why?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"You know I do."

She did not answer, but sat rigidly, in thought. Horthy dozed off.

Later—probably two hours later—he was awakened by Zena's hand on his shoulder. She was crouched on the floor by his bunk. "Wake up, Horthy. Wake up!"

"Wuh?"

"Listen to me, Horthy. You remember all you've told me—*please* wake up!—remember, about Kay, and all?"

"Oh, sure."

"What was it you were going to do, some day?"

"You mean about going back there and seeing Kay again, and getting even with that old Armand?"

"That's right. Well, that's exactly

what you're going to do."

"Well, sure." He yawned and closed his eyes. She shook him again. "I mean now, Horthy. Tonight. Right now."

"Tonight? Right now?"

"Get up, Horthy. Get dressed. I mean it."

He sat up blearily. "Zee...it's night time!"

"Get dressed," she said between her teeth. "Hop to it, Kiddo. You can't be a baby all your life."

HE SAT on the edge of the bed and shivered away the last smoky edges of sleep. "Zee!" he cried. "Go away? You mean, leave here? Leave the carnival and Havana and—and you?"

"That's right. Get dressed, Horthy."

"But—where will I go?" He reached for his clothes. "What will I do? I don't know anybody out there!"

"You know where we are? It's only fifty miles to the town you came from. That's as near as we'll get this year. Anyway, you've been here too long," she added, her voice suddenly gentle. "You should have left before—a year ago, two years, maybe." She handed him a clean blouse.

"But why do I have to?" he asked pitifully.

"Call it a hunch, though it isn't, really. You wouldn't get through that appointment with the Maneater tomorrow. You've got to get out of here and stay out."

"I can't go!" he said, childishly protesting even as he obeyed her. "What are you going to tell the Maneater?"

"You had a telegram from your cousin, or some such thing. Leave it to me. You won't ever have to worry about it."

"Not ever—can't I ever come back?"

"If you ever see the Maneater again, you turn and run. Hide. Do anything, but never let him near you as long as you live."

"What about you, Zee? I'll never see you again!" He zipped up the side of a grey pleated skirt and held still for Zee's deft application of eyebrow pencil.

"Yes you will," she said softly. "Some day. Some way. Write to me and tell me where you are."

"Write to you? Suppose the Maneater should get my letter? Would that be all right?"

"It would not." She sat down, casting a woman's absent, accurate appraisal over Horty. "Write to Havana. A penny postcard. Don't sign it. Pick it out on a typewriter. Advertise something—hats or haircuts, or some such. Put your return address on it but transpose each pair of numbers. Will you remember that?"

"I'll remember," said Horty vaguely.

"I know you will. You never forget anything. You know what you're going to learn now, Horty?"

"What?"

"You're going to learn to use what you know. You're just a child now. If you were anyone else, I'd say you were a case of arrested development. But all the books we've read and studied...you remember your anatomy, Horty? And the physiology?"

"Sure, and the science and history and all that. Zee, what am I going to do out there? I got nobody to tell me anything!"

"You'll have to tell yourself now."

"I don't know what to do first!" he wailed.

"Honey, honey..." She came to him and kissed his forehead and the tip of his nose. "You walk out to the

highway, see? And stay out of sight. Go down the road about a quarter of a mile and flag a bus. Don't ride in anything else but a bus. When you get to town wait at the station until about nine o'clock in the morning and then find yourself a room in a rooming house. A quiet one on a small street. Don't spend too much money. Get yourself a job as soon as you can. You better be a boy, so the Maneater won't know where to look."

"Am I going to grow?" he asked, voicing the professional fear of all midgets.

"Maybe. That depends. Don't go looking for Kay and that Armand creature until you're ready for it."

"How will I know when I'm ready?"

"You'll know. Got your bank-book? Keep on banking by mail, the way you always have. Got enough money? Good. You'll be all right, Horty. Don't ask anyone for anything. Don't tell anyone anything. Do things for yourself, or do without."

"I don't—belong out there," he muttered.

"I know. You will, though; just the way you came to belong here. You'll see."

Moving gracefully and easily on high heels, Horty went to the door. "Well, good-by, Zee. I—I wish I— Couldn't you come with me?"

She shook her glossy dark head. "I wouldn't dare, Kiddo. I'm the only *human being* the Maneater talks to—really talks to. And I've—got to watch what he's doing."

"Oh." He never asked what he should not ask. Childish, helpless, implicitly obedient, the exact, functional product of his environment, he gave her a frightened smile and

turned to the door. "Good bye, honey," she whispered, smiling.

When he had gone she sank down on his bunk and cried. She tried all night. It was not until the next morning that she remembered Jun-ky's jewelled eyes.

CHAPTER VII

A DOZEN years had passed since Kay Hallowell had seen from the back window, Horty Bluett climb into a brilliantly painted truck, one misty night. Those years had not treated the Hallowells kindly. They had moved into a smaller house, and then into an apartment, where her mother died. Her father had hung on for a while longer, and then had joined his wife, and Kay, at nineteen, left college in her junior year and went to work to help her brother through pre-medical school.

She was a cool blonde, careful and steady, with eyes like twilight. She carried a great deal on her shoulders, and she kept them squared. Inwardly she was afraid to be frightened, afraid to be impressionable, to be swayed, to be moved, so that outwardly she wore carefully constructed poise. She had a job to do; she had to get ahead herself so that she could help Bobby through the arduous process of becoming a doctor. She had to keep her self-respect, which meant decent housing and decent clothes. Maybe some day she could relax and have fun, but not now. Not tomorrow or next week. Just some day. Now, when she went out to dance, or to a show, she could only enjoy herself cautiously, up to the point where late hours, or a strong new interest, or even enjoyment itself, might interfere with her job. And this was a great pity, for she had a deep and brimming reser-

voir of laughter.

"Good Morning, Judge." How she hated that man, with his twitching nostrils and his limp white hands. Her boss, T. Spinney Hartford, of Benson, Hartford and Hartford, was a nice enough man but he certainly hobnobbed with some specimens. Oh well: that's the law business. "Mr. Hartford will be with you in a moment. Please sit down, Judge."

Not there, Wet-Eyes! Oh dear, right next to her desk. Well, he always did.

She flashed him a meaningless smile and went to the filing cabinets across the room before he could start that part weak, part bewildering line of his. She hated the waste of time; there was nothing she needed from the files. But she couldn't sit there and ignore him, and she knew he wouldn't shout across the office at her; he preferred the technique described by Thorne Smith as "a voice as low as his intentions."

She felt his moist gaze on her back, on her hips, rolling up and down the seams of her stockings, and she had an attack of gooseflesh that all but itched. This wouldn't do. Maybe short range would be better; perhaps she could parry what she couldn't screen. She returned to her desk, gave him the same lipped smile, and pulled out her typewriter, swinging it up on its smooth countersprung swivels. She ran in some letterhead and began to type busily.

"Miss Hallowell."

She typed.

"Miss Hallowell." He reached and took her wrist. "Please don't be so very busy. We have such a brief moment together."

SHE LET her hands fall into her lap—one of them, at least. She let the other hang unresisting in the Judge's limp white clasp until he let

it go. She folded her hands and looked at them. That voice! If she looked up she was sure she would see a trickle of drool on his chin. "Yes, Judge?"

"Do you enjoy it here?"

"Yes. Mr. Hartford is very kind."

"A most agreeable man. Most agreeable." He waited until Kay felt so stupid, sitting there staring at her hands, that she had to raise her face. Then he said, "You plan to stay here for quite a while, then."

"I don't see why—that is, I'd like to."

"The best-laid plans..." he murmured. Now, what was that? A threat to her job? What did this slavering stuffed-shirt have to do with her job? "*Mr. Hartford is a most agreeable man.*" Oh, Oh dear. Mr. Hartford was a lawyer, and frequently had cases in Surrogate. Some of those were hairline decisions on which a lot depended. "*Most agreeable.*" Of course Mr. Hartford was an agreeable man. He had a living to make.

Kay waited for the next gambit. It came.

"You really won't have to work here more than two more years, as I understand it."

"Wh—why? Oh. How did you know about that?"

"My dear girl," he said, with an insipid modesty. "I naturally know the contents of my files. Your father was most provident, and very wise. When you are twenty-one, you'll be in for a comfortable bit of money, eh?"

It's none of your business, you old lynx. "Why, I'll hardly notice that, Judge. That's earmarked for Bobby, my brother. It will put him through his last two years and a year of specialization too, if he wants it. And we won't have to lose a wink of sleep over anything from then on.

We're just keeping above water until then. But I'll go on working."

"Admirable." He twitched his nostrils at her, and she bit her lip and looked down at her hands again. "Very lovely," he added appreciatively. Again she waited. Move Three took place. He sighed. "Did you know there was a lien on your father's estate, for an old partnership matter?"

"I—had heard that. The old agreements were torn up when the partnership was dissolved in Daddy's trucking business."

"One set of papers was not torn up. I still have them. Your father was a trusting man."

"That account was squared twice over, Judge!" Kay's eyes could, sometimes, take on the slate color of thunderclouds. They did now.

The Judge leaned back and put his fingertips together. "It is a matter which could get to court. To Surrogate, by the way."

HE COULD ger her job. Maybe he could get the money and with it, Bobby's career. The alternative...well, she could expect that now.

She was so right.

"Since my dear wife departed—" (She remembered his dear wife. A cruel, empty-headed creature with wit enough to cater to his ego in the days before he became a judge, and nothing else) "—I am a very lonely man, Miss Hallowell. I have never met anyone quite like you. You have beauty, and you could be clever. You can go far. I would like to know you better," he simpered.

Over my dead body. "You would?" she said inanely, stiff with disgust and fear.

He underlined it. "A lovely girl like you, with such a nice job, and with that little nest-egg coming to

you—if nothing happens." He leaned forward. "I'm going to call you Kay from now on. I'm sure we understand each other."

"No!" She said it because she did understand, not because she didn't.

He took it his way. "Then I'd be happy to explain further," he chuckled. "Say tonight. Quite late tonight. A man in my position can't—law!—trip the light fantastic where the lights are bright."

Kay said nothing.

"There's a little place," sniggered the Judge, "called Club Nemo, on Oak Street. Know it?"

"I think I have—noticed it," she said with difficulty.

"One o'clock," he said cheerfully. He stood up and leaned over her. He smelled like soured after-shave. "I do not like to stay up late for nothing. I'm sure you'll be there."

Her thoughts raced. She was furious, and she was frightened, two emotions which she had avoided for years. She wanted to do several things. She wanted primarily to scream, and to get rid of her breakfast, then and there. She wanted to tell him some things about himself. She wanted to storm into Mr. Hartford's office and demand to know if this, this, and that were included in her duties as a stenographer.

But then, there was Bobby, so close to a career. She knew what it was to have to quit on the home-stretch. And poor, fretting, worried Mr. Hartford; he meant no harm, but he wouldn't know how to handle a thing like this. And one more thing, a thing the Judge apparently did not suspect—her proven ability to land on her feet.

So instead of doing any of the things she wanted to do, she smiled timidly and said, "We'll see..."

"We'll see each other," he amended. "We'll see a great deal of each

other." She felt that moist gaze again on the nape of her neck as he moved off, felt it on her armpits.

A light on her switchboard glowed. "Mr. Hartford will see you now, Judge Bluett," she said.

He pinched her cheek. "You can call me Armand," he whispered. "When we're alone, of course."

CHAPTER VIII

HE WAS there when she arrived. She was late—only a few minutes, but they cost a great deal. They were minutes added to the hours of fuming hatred, of disgust, and of fear which she had gone through after the Judge's simpering departure from the Hartford offices that morning.

She stood for a moment just inside the club. It was quiet—quiet lights, quiet colors, quiet music from a three-piece orchestra. There were very few customers, and none she knew. She caught a glimpse of silver hair in the corner back of the jutting corner of the bandstand at a shadowed table. She went to it more because she knew he would choose such a spot than because she recognized him.

He stood up and pulled out a chair for her. "I knew you'd come."

How could I get out of it, you toad? "Of course I came," she said. "I'm sorry you had to wait."

"I'm glad you're sorry. I'd have to make you sorry, if you weren't." He laughed when he said it, and only served to stress the pleasure he felt at the thought. He ran the back of his hand over her forearm, leaving a new spoor of gooseflesh. "Kay. Pretty little Kay," he moaned. "I've got to tell you something. I really put some pressure on you this morning."

You don't say! "You did?" she asked.

"You must have realized it. Well, I want you to know right away, right now, that I didn't mean any of that—except about how lonely I am. People don't realize that as well as being a judge, I'm a man."

That makes me one of the people. She smiled at him. This was a rather complicated process. It involved the fact that in this persuasive, self-pitying speech his voice had acquired a whine, and his features the down-drawn character of a spaniel's face. She half-closed her eyes to blur his image, and got such a startling facsimile of a mournful hound's head over his wing collar that she was reminded of an overheard remark: "He's that way through having been annoyed, at an early age, by the constant barking of his mother." Hence the smile. He misunderstood it and the look that went with it and stroked her arm again. Her smile vanished, though she still showed her teeth.

"What I mean is," he crooned, "I just want you to like me for myself. I'm sorry I had to use any pressure. It's just that I didn't want to fail. Anyway, all's fair...you know."

"—in love and war," she said dutifully. And this means war. Love me for myself alone, or else.

"I won't ask much of you," he said out of wet lips. "It's only that a man wants to feel cherished."

She closed her eyes again so he could not see them roll heavenward. He wouldn't ask much. Just sneaking and skulking to protect his "position" in the town. Just that face, that voice, those hands...the swine, the blackmailer, the doddering, slimy-fingered old *wolf!* *Bobby, Bobby*, she thought in anguish, *be a good doctor...*

THERE was more of it, much more. A drink arrived. His choice for a sweet young girl. A sherry flip. It was too sweet and the foam on it grabbed unpleasantly at her lipstick. She sipped and let the Judge's sentimental slop wash over her, nodded and smiled, and, as often as she could, tuned out the sound of his voice and listened to the music. It was competent and clean—Hammond Solovox, string bass, and guitar—and for a while it was the only thing in the whole foul world she could hold on to.

Judge Bluett had, it seemed, a little place tucked away over a store in the slums. "The Judge works in the court and his chambers," he intoned, "and has a fine residence on The Hill. But Bluett the Man has a place too, a comfortable spot, a diamond in a rough setting, a place where he can cast aside the black robes, his dignities and his honors, and learn again that he has red blood in his veins."

"It must be very nice," she said.

"One can hide there," he said expansively. "I should say, two can hide there. All the conveniences. A cellar at your elbow, a larder at your beck and call. A civilized wilderness for a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and—th-h-owoo." He ended with a hoarse whisper, and Kay had the insane feeling that if his eyes protruded another inch, a man could sit on one and saw the other off.

She closed her eyes again and explored her resources. She felt that she had possibly twenty seconds of endurance left. Eighteen. Sixteen. Oh, this is fine. Here goes Bobby's career up in smoke—in a mushroom-shaped cloud at a table for two.

He gathered his feet under him and rose. "You'll excuse me for a moment," he said, not quite clicking his

heels. He made a little joke about powder rooms, and obviously being human. He turned away and turned back and pointed out that this was only the first of the little intimacies they would come to learn of each other. He turned away and turned back and said "Think it over. Perhaps we can slip away to our little dreamland this very night!" He turned away and if he had turned back again he would have gotten a French heel in the area of his watch-pocket.

Kay sat alone at the table and visibly wilted. Anger and scorn had sustained her; now, for a moment, fear and weariness took their places. Her shoulders sagged and turned forward and her chin went down, and a tear slid out onto her cheek. This was three degrees worse than awful. This was too much to pay for a Mayo Clinic full of doctors. She wanted out. Something had to happen, right now.

Something did. A pair of hands appeared, on the tablecloth in front of her.

She looked up and met the eyes of the young man who stood there. He had a broad, unremarkable face. He was nearly as blond as she, though his eyes were dark. He had a good mouth. He said, "A lot of people don't know the difference between a musician and a potted palm when they go to pour their hearts out. You're in a spot, Ma'am."

Some of her anger returned, but it subsided, engulfed in a flood of embarrassment. She could say only, "Please leave me alone."

"I can't. I heard that routine." He tossed his head toward the rest rooms. "There's a way out, if you'll trust me."

"I'll keep the devil I know," she said coldly.

"You listen to me. I mean listen, until I'm finished. Then you can do as you like. When he comes back, stall him off for tonight. Promise to meet him here tomorrow night. Make it a real good act. Then tell him you shouldn't leave here together; you might be seen. He'll think of that anyway."

"And he leaves, and I'm at your tender mercies?"

"Don't be a goon! Sorry. No, you leave first. Go straight to the station and catch the first train out. There's a northbound at three o'clock and a southbound at three-twelve. Go somewhere else, hole up, find yourself another job, and stay out of sight."

"On what? Three dollars mad-money?"

HE FLIPPED a long wallet out of his inside jacket pocket. "Here's three hundred. You're smart enough to make out all right on that."

"You're crazy! You don't know me, and I don't know you. Besides, I haven't anything up for sale."

He made an exasperated gesture. "Who said anything about that? I said take a train—any train. No one's going to follow you."

"You are crazy. How could I get it back to you?"

"You worry about that. I work here. Drop by some time—during the day when I'm not here, if you like, and leave it for me."

"What on earth makes you want to do a thing like that?"

His voice was very gentle. "Say it's the same thing makes me bring raw fish to alley-cats. Oh, stop arguing. You need an out and this is it."

"I can't do a thing like that!"

"You got a good imagination? The kind that makes pictures?"

"I—suppose so."

"Then, forgive me, but you need a kick in the teeth. If you don't do what I just told you, that crumb is going to—" and in a half-dozen simple, terse words, he told her exactly what that crumb was going to do. Then, with a single deft motion, he slipped the bills into her handbag and got back on the bandstand.

She sat, sick and shaken, until Bluett returned. She had an unusually vivid pictorial imagination.

"While I was gone," he said, settling into his chair and beckoning to the waiter for the check, "know what I was doing?"

That, she thought, is just the kind of question I need right now. Limpidly, she asked, "What?"

"I was thinking about that little place, and how wonderful it would be if I could slip away after a hard day at court, and find you there waiting for me." He smiled fatuously. "And no one would ever know."

Kay sent up a "Lord-forgive-me, I-know-not-what-I-do," and said distinctly, "I think that's a charming idea. Just charming."

"And it wouldn't—*what?*?"

For a moment she almost pitied him. Here he had his lines flaked out, his hooks sharpened and greased, and his casting arm worked up to a fine snap, and she'd robbed him of his sport. She'd driven up behind him with a wagon-load of fish. She'd surrendered.

"Well," he said. "Well, I, hm. Hm-m-m! Waiter!"

"But," she said archly, "Not tonight, Ar-mand."

"Now, Kay. Just come up and look at it. It's not far."

She figuratively spit on her hands, took a deep breath and plunged—wondering vaguely at just what instant she had decided to take this fantastic course. She batted her eyelashes only a delicate twice, and said

softly, "Ar-mand, I'm not an experienced person like you, and I—" she hesitated and dropped her eyes—"I want it to be perfect. And tonight, it's all so sudden, and I haven't been able to look forward to anything, and it's terribly late and we're both tired, and I have to work tomorrow but I won't the day after, and besides—" and here she capped it. Here she generated, on the spot, the most diffuse and colorful statement of her entire life—"Besides," she said, fluttering her hands prettily, "I'm not ready."

SHE PEEPED at him from the sides of her eyes and saw his bony face undergo four distinct expressions, one after the other. Again there was that within her which was capable of astonishment; she had been able to think of only three possible reactions to a statement like that. At the same moment the guitarist behind her, in the middle of a fluid *glissando*, got his little finger trapped underneath his A string on the fingerboard.

Before Armand Bluett could get his breath back, she said, "Tomorrow, Ar-mand. But—" She blushed. When she was a child, reading "Ivanhoe" and "The Deerslayer", she used to practice blushing before the mirror. She never could do it. Yet she did it now. "But earlier," she finished.

Her astonishment factor clicked again, this time with the thought, why haven't I ever tried this before?

"Tomorrow night? You'll come?" he said. "You really will?"

"What time, Ar-mand? she asked submissively.

"Well now. Hmp. Ah—say eleven?"

"Oh, it would be crowded here then. Ten, before the shows are over."

"I knew you were clever," he said admiringly.

She grasped the point firmly and

pressed it. "There are always too many people," she said, looking around. "You know, we shouldn't leave together. Just in case."

He shook his head in wonder, and beamed.

"I'll just—" she paused, looking at his eyes, his mouth. "I'll just go, like that." She snapped her fingers. "No goodbyes..."

She skipped to her feet and ran out, clutching her purse. And as she passed the end of the bandstand, the guitarist, speaking in a voice just loud enough to reach her, and barely moving his lips, said,

"Lady, you ought to have your mouth washed out with bourbon."

CHAPTER IX

HIS HONOR, the Surrogate Armand Bluett, left his chambers early the next afternoon. Dressed in a dark brown business suit and seeing alternately from the corners of his eyes, he taxied across town, paid off the driver, and skulked down a narrow street. He strolled past a certain doorway twice to be sure he was not followed, and then dodged inside, key in hand.

Upstairs, he went through the compact two-and-kitchenette with a fine-toothed comb. He opened all the windows and aired the place out. Stuffed between the cushions on the couch he found a rainbow-hued silk scarf redolent with cheap, dying scent. He dropped it in the incinerator with a snort. "Won't need *that* any more."

He checked the refrigerator, the kitchen shelves, the bathroom cabinet. He ran the water and tested the gas and the lights. He tried the end-table lamps, the torchere, the radio. He ran a small vacuum cleaner over the rugs and the heavy drapes. Finally, grunting with satisfaction, he

went into the bathroom and shaved and showered. There followed clouds of talc and a haze of cologne. He pared his toenails, after which he stood before the cheval glass in various abnormal chest-out poses, admiring his reflection through a rose-colored ego.

He dressed carefully in a subdued hound's-tooth check and a tie designed strictly for the contracting pupil, returned to the mirror for a heady fifteen minutes, sat down and painted his nails with colorless polish, and wandered dreamily around fluttering his flabby hands and thinking detailed thoughts, reciting, half-aloud, little lines of witty, sophisticated dialogue. "Who polished your eyes?" he muttered, and "My dear, dear child, that was nothing, really nothing. A study in harmony, before the complex instrumentation of the flesh...no, she's not old enough for that one. Hm. You're the cream in my coffee. No! *I'm* not old enough for that."

So he passed the evening, very pleasantly indeed. At 8:30 he left, to dine sumptuously at a seafood restaurant. At 9:50 he was ensconced at the corner table at Club Nemo, buffing his glittering nails on his lapel and alternately wetting his lips and dabbing at them with a napkin.

At ten o'clock she arrived.

Last night he had risen to his feet as she crossed the dance floor. Tonight he was up out of his chair and at her side before she reached it.

This was Kay transformed. This was the concretion of his wildest dreams of her.

Her hair was turned back from her face in soft small billows which framed her face. Her eyes were skillfully shadowed, and seemed to have taken on a violet tinge with their blue. She wore a long cloak of some

heavy material, and under it, a demure but skin-tight jacket of black cire satin and a black hem-slashed skirt.

"Armand..." she whispered, holding out both hands.

HE TOOK them. His lips opened and closed twice before he could say anything at all, and then she was past him, walking with a long, easy stride to the table. Walking behind her, he saw her pause as the orchestra started up, and throw a glance of disdain at the guitarist. At the table she unclasped the cloak at her throat and let it fall away confidently. Armand Bluett was there to receive it as she slid into her chair. He stood there goggling at her for so long that she laughed at him. "Aren't you going to say anything at all?"

"I'm speechless," he said, and thought, my word, that came out effectively.

A waiter came, and he ordered for her. Daiquiri, this time. No woman he had ever seen reminded him less of a sherry flip.

"I am a very lucky man," he said. That was twice in a row he had said something unrehearsed.

"Not as lucky as I am," she said, and she seemed quite sincere as she said it. She put out just the tip of a pink tongue; her eyes sparkled, and she laughed. For Bluett, the room began to gyrate. He looked down at her hands, toying with the clasp of a tiny cosmetic case.

"I don't think I ever noticed your hands before," he said.

"Please do," she twinkled. "I love the things you say, Ar-mand," and she put her hands in his. They were long, strong hands with square palms and tapered fingers and what certainly must be the smoothest skin in the world.

The drinks came. He let go reluctantly and they both leaned back, looking at each other. She said, "Glad we waited?"

"Oh, yes. Hm. Yes indeed." Suddenly, waiting was intolerable. Almost inadvertently he snatched up his drink and drained it.

The guitarist fluffed a note. She looked pained. Armand said, "It's not too nice here tonight, is it?"

Her eyes glistened. "You know a better place?" she asked softly.

His heart rose up and thumped the lower side of his Adam's apple. "I certainly do," he said when he could.

She inclined her head with an extraordinary, controlled acquiescence that was almost like a deep pain to him. He threw a bill on the table, put her cloak over her shoulders, and led her out.

IN THE CAB he lunged for her almost before the machine was away from the curb. She hardly seemed to move at all, but her body twisted away from him inside the cloak; he found himself with a double handful of cloth while Kay's profile smiled slightly, shaking its head. It was unspoken, but it was a flat "no". It was also a credit to the low frictional index of cire, satin.

"I never knew you were like this," he said.

"Like what?"

"You weren't this way last night," he floundered.

"What way, Ar-mand?" she teased.

"You weren't so—I mean, you didn't seem to be sure of yourself at all."

She looked at him. "I wasn't—ready."

"Oh, I see," he lied.

Conversation lapsed after that, until he paid off the cab at the street intersection near his hideout. He was

beginning to feel that the situation was out of his control. If she controlled it, however, as she had so far, he was more than willing to go along.

Walking down the dirty, narrow street, he said, "Don't look at any of this, Kay. It's quite different upstairs."

"It's all the same, when I'm with you," she said, stepping over some garbage. He was very pleased.

They climbed the stairs, and he flung open the door with a wide gesture. "Enter, fair lady, the land of the lotus-eaters."

She pirouetted in and cooed over the drapes, the lamps, the pictures. He closed the door and shot the bolt, dropped his hat on the couch and stalked toward her. He was about to put his arms around her from behind when she spun away. "What a way to begin!" she sang. "Putting your hat there. Don't you know it's bad luck to put a hat on a bed?"

"This is my lucky day," he pronounced.

"Mine too," she said. "So let's not spoil it. Let's pretend we've been here forever, and we'll be here forever."

He smiled. "I like that."

"I'm glad. That way," she said, stepping away from a corner as he approached, "there's no hurry. Could we have a drink?"

"You may have the moon," he chanted. He opened the kitchenette. "What would you like?"

"Oh, how wonderful. Let me, let me. You go into the other room and sit down, Mister Man. This is woman's work." She shunted him out, and began to mix, busily.

Armand lounged back on the couch with his feet on the rock-maple coffee table, and listened to the pleasant clinking and swizzling noises from the other room. He wondered

idly if he could get her to bring his slippers every evening.

SHE GLIDED in, balancing two tall highballs on a small tray. She kept one hand behind her back as she knelt and put the tray down on the coffee table and slipped into an easy-chair.

"What are you hiding?" he asked.

"It's a secret."

"Come over here."

"Let's talk a little while first. Please."

"A little while." He sniggered. "It's your fault, Kay. You're so beautiful. Hm. You make me feel mad—impetuous." He began rubbing his hands together. She closed her eyes. "Armand..."

"Yes, my little one," he answered, patronizingly.

"Did you ever hurt anyone?"

He sat up. "I? Kay, are you afraid?" He puffed his chest out a bit. "Afraid of me? Why, I won't hurt you, baby."

"I'm not talking about me," she said, a little impatiently. "I just asked you—did you ever hurt anyone?"

"Why, of course not. Not intentionally, that is. You must remember—my business is justice."

"Justice." She said it as if it tasted good. "There are two ways of hurting people, Armand—outside, where it shows, and inside, in the mind, where it scars and festers."

"I don't follow you," he said, his pomposity returning as his confusion grew. "Whom have I ever hurt?"

"Kay Hallowell, for one," she said detachedly, "with the kind of pressure you've been putting on. Not because she's a minor; you are only a criminal on paper for that, and even that wouldn't apply in some states."

"Now, look here, young lady—"

"—but because," she went on calmly, "you have been systematically wrecking what faith she has in humanity. If there is a basic justice, than for that you are a criminal by its standards."

"Kay—what's come over you? What are you talking about? I won't have any more of this!" He leaned back and folded his arms. She sat quietly.

"I know," he said, half to himself, "you're joking. Is that it, baby?"

In the same level, detached tone, she went on speaking. "You are guilty of hurting others in both the ways I mentioned. Physically, where it shows, and psychically. You will be punished in both those ways, *Justice Bluett*."

He blew air from his nostrils. "That is quite enough. I did not bring you here for anything like this. Perhaps I shall have to remind you, after all, that I am not a man to be trifled with. Hm. The matter of your estate—"

"I am not trifling, Armand." She leaned across the low table to him. He put up his hands. "What do you want?" he breathed, before he could stop himself.

"Your handkerchief."

"My h—what?"

She plucked it out of his breast pocket. "Thank you." As she spoke she shook it out, brought up two corners and knotted them together. She slipped her left hand through the loop and settled the handkerchief high on her forearm. "I am going to punish you first in the way it doesn't show," she said informatively, "by reminding you, in a way you can't forget, of how you once hurt someone else."

"What kind of nonsense—"

She reached behind her with her right hand and brought out what she had been hiding—a new, sharp, heavy

cleaver.

Armand Bluett cowered away, back into the couch cushions. "Kay—no! No!" he panted. His face turned green. "I haven't touched you, Kay! I only wanted to talk. I wanted to help you and—and your brother. Put that thing down, Kay!" He was drooling with terror. "Can't we be friends, Kay?" he whimpered.

"Stop it!" she hissed. She lifted the cleaver high, resting her left hand on the table and leaning toward him. Her face made, line upon plane upon carven curve, a mask of utter contempt. "I told you that your physical punishment comes later. Think about this while you wait for it."

THE CLEAVER arched over and came down, with every ounce of a lithe body behind it. Armand Bluett screamed—a ridiculous, hoarse, thin sound. He closed his eyes. The cleaver crashed into the heavy top of the coffee-table. Armand twisted and scrambled back into the cushions, crabbed sidewise and backward along the wall until he could go no farther. He stopped ludicrously, on all fours on the couch, backed into the corner, sweat and spittle running off his chin. He opened his eyes.

It had apparently taken him only a split second to make the hysterical move, for she still stood over the table; she still held the handle of the cleaver. Its edge had buried itself in the thick wood, after passing through the flesh and bone of her hand.

She snatched up the bronze letter-opener and thrust it under the handkerchief on her forearm. As she straightened, bright arterial blood spouted from the stumps of three severed fingers. Her face was pale under the cosmetics, but not one whit changed otherwise; it still wore its proud, unadulterated contempt. She

stood straight and tall, twisting the handkerchief with the handle of the letter-opener, making a tourniquet, and she stared him down. As his eyes fell, she spat, "Isn't this better than what you planned? Now you've got a part of me to keep for your very own. That's much better than using something and giving it back."

The spurting blood had slowed to a dribble as she twisted. Now she went to the chair on which she had left her cosmetic case. Out of it she worried a rubber glove. Holding the tourniquet against her side, she pulled the glove over her hand and snugged it around the wrist.

Armand Bluett began to vomit.

She shouldered into her cloak and went to the door.

When she had drawn back the bolt and opened it, she called back in a velvety, seductive voice, "It's been so wonderful, Ar-mand darling. Let's do it again soon..."

It took Armand's mind nearly an hour to claw its way up out of the pit of panic into which it had fallen. During the hour he hunkered there on the couch in his own filth, staring at the cleaver and the three still white fingers.

Three fingers.

Three *left* fingers.

Somewhere, deep in his mind, that meant something to him. At the moment he refused to let it surface. He feared it would. He knew it would. He knew that when it did, he would know consuming terror.

CHAPTER X

"YES—I AM Pierre Monetre. Come in." He stood aside and the girl entered.

"This is good of you, Mr. Monetre. I know you must be terribly busy. And probably you won't be able to help me at all."

"I might not if I were able," he

said. "Sit down."

She took a molded plywood chair which stood at the end of the half desk, half lab bench which took up almost an end wall of the trailer. He looked at her coldly. Soft yellow hair, eyes sometimes slate-blue, sometimes a shade darker than sky-blue; a studied coolness through which he, with his schooled perceptions, could readily see. She is disturbed, he thought; frightened and ashamed of it. He waited.

She said, "There's something I've got to find out. It happened years ago. I'd almost forgotten about it, and then saw your posters, and I remembered...I could be wrong, but if only—" She kneaded her hands together. Monetre watched them, and then returned his cold stare to her face.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Monetre. I can't seem to get to the point. It's all so vague and so—terribly important. The thing is, when I was a little girl, seven or eight years old, there was a boy in my class in school who ran away. He was about my age, and had some sort of horrible run-in with his stepfather. I think he was hurt. His hand. I don't know how badly. I was probably the last one in town to see him. No one ever saw him again."

Monetre picked up some papers, shifted them, put them down again. "I really don't know what I can do about that, Miss—"

"Hallowell. Kay Hallowell. Please hear me out, Mr. Monetre. I've come thirty miles just to see you, because I can't afford to pass up the slightest chance—"

"If you cry, you'll have to get out," he rasped. His voice was so rough that she started. Then he said, with velvet gentleness, "Please go on."

"Th-thank you. I'll be quick...it was just after dark, a rainy, misty night. We lived by the highway, and



I went out back for something... I forget... anyway, he was there, by the traffic light. I spoke to him. He asked me not to tell anyone that I had seen him, and I never have, till now. Then—" she closed her eyes, obviously trying to bring back every detail of the memory—"—I think someone called me. I turned to the gate and left him. But I peeped out again, and saw him climbing on the back of a truck that was stopped for the light. It was one of your trucks. I'm sure it was. The way it was painted... and yesterday, when I saw your posters, I thought of it."

Monetre waited, his deep-set eyes expressionless. He seemed to realize, suddenly, that she had finished. "That happened twelve years ago? And, I suppose, you want to know if that boy reached the carnival."

"Yes."

"He did not. If he had, I should certainly have known of it."

"Oh... It was a faint sound, stricken, yet resigned; apparently she had not expected anything else. She pulled herself together visibly, and said, "He was small for his age. He had very dark hair and eyes and a pointed face. His name was Horty—Horton."

"Horty..." Monetre searched his memory. There was a familiar ring to those two syllables, somehow. Now, where... He shook his head. "I don't remember any boy called Horty."

"Please try. *Please!* You see—" She looked at him searchingly, her eyes asking a question. He answered it, saying, "You can trust me."

SHE SMILED. "Thank you. Well, there's a man, a horrible person. He was once responsible for that boy. He's doing a terrible thing to me; it's something to do with an old law case, and he might be able to keep

me from getting some money that is due me when I come of age. I need it. Not for myself; it's for my brother. He's going to be a doctor, and—"

"I don't like doctors," said Monetre. If there is a great bell for hatred as there is one for freedom, it rang in his voice as he said that. He stood up. "I know nothing about any boy named Horty, who disappeared twelve years ago. I am not interested in finding him in any case, particularly if doing so would help a man make a parasite of himself and fools of his patients. I am not a kidnapper, and will have nothing to do with a search which reeks of that and blackmail to boot. Good-by."

She had risen with him. Her eyes were round. "I—I'm sorry. Really, I—"

"Good-by." It was the velvet this time, used with care, used to show her that his gentleness was a virtuosity, an overlay. She turned to the door, opened it. She stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "May I leave you my address, just in case, some day, you—"

"You may not," he said. He turned his back on her and sat down. He heard the door close.

He closed his eyes, and his arched, slit nostrils expanded until they were round holes. Humans, humans, and their complex, useless, unimportant machinations. There was no mystery about humans; no puzzle. Everything human could be brought to light by asking simply, "What does it gain you?"... What could humans know of a life-form to which the idea of gain was alien? What could a human say of his crystal-kin, the living jewels which could communicate with each other and did not care to, which could co-operate with each other and scorned to?

And what—he let himself smile—what would humans do when they had to fight the alien? When they were up against an enemy which would make an advance and then scorn to consolidate it—and then make a different *kind* of advance, in a different way, in another place?

He sank into an esoteric reverie, marshalling his crystallines against teeming, stupid mankind; losing, in his thoughts, the pointless perturbations of a girl in a search for a child long missing, for some petty gainful reason of her own.

"Hey—Maneater."

"Damn it! What now?"

The door opened diffidently. "Maneater, there's—"

"Come in, Havana, and speak up. I don't like mumblers."

Havana edged in, after setting his cigar down on the step. "There's a man outside wants to see you."

Monetre glowered over his shoulder. "Your hair's getting gray. What's left of it. Dye it."

"Okay, okay. Right away, this afternoon. I'm sorry." He shifted his feet miserably. "About this man—"

"I've had my quota for today," said Monetre. "Useless people wanting impossible things of no importance. Did you see that girl go out of here?"

"Yes. That's what I'm trying to tell you. So did this guy. See, he was waiting to see you. He asked Johnward where he could find you, and—"

"I think I'll fire Johnward. He's an advance man, not an usher. What business has he, bringing people to annoy me?"

"I guess he thought you ought to see this one. A big-shot," said Havana timidly. "So when he got your trailer, he asked me were you busy. I told him yes, you were talking to someone. He said he'd wait. About then the door opens, and that girl comes

out. She puts a hand on the side and turns back to say something to you, and this guy, this big-shot, he blows a fuse. No kidding, Maneater, I never seen anything like it. He grabs my shoulder. I'll have a bruise there for a week. He says, 'It's her! It's her!' and I says 'Who?' and he says, 'Her hand; she's grown it back!'"

MONETRE sat bolt upright and turned in his swivel chair to face the midget. "Go on, Havana," he said in his gentle voice.

"Well, that's all. 'Cept he ducked back behind Gogol's bally-platform and hunkered down out of sight, and peeped out at that girl as she walked past him. She never saw him."

"Where is he now?"

Havana glanced through the door. "Still right there. Looks pretty bad. I think he's having some kind of a fit."

Monetre left his chair and shot through the door, leaving it completely up to Havana whether he got out of the way or not. The midget leaped to the side, out of Monetre's direct path, but not far enough to avoid the bony edge of Monetre's pelvis, which glanced stunningly off Havana's pudgy cheekbone.

Monetre bounded to the side of the man who cowered down behind the bally platform. He knelt and placed a sure hand on the man's forehead, which was clammy and cold.

"It's all right now, sir," he said in a deep, soothing voice. "You'll be perfectly safe with me." He urged the idea "safe", because, whatever the cause might be, the man was sodden, trembling, all but ecstatic with fear. Monetre asked no questions, but kept crooning, "You're in good hands now, sir. Quite safe. Nothing can happen now. Come along, we'll have a drink. You'll be all right."

The man's watery eyes fixed themselves on him, slowly. Awareness crept into them, and a certain embarrassment. He said, "Hm. Uh—slight attack of—hm... vertigo, you know. Sorry to be... hm."

Monetre courteously helped him up, picked up a brown homburg and dusted it off. "My office is just there. Do come in and sit down."

Monetre kept a firm hand on the man's elbow, led him to the trailer, handed him up the two steps, reached past him and opened the door. "Would you like to lie down for a few minutes?"

"No, no. Thank you; you're very kind."

"Sit here, then. I think you'll find it comfortable. I'll get you something that will make you feel better." He fingered a simple combination latch, chose a bottle of tawny port. From a desk drawer he took a small phial and put two drops of liquid into a glass, filling it with the wine. "Drink this. It will make you feel better: A little sodium amytal—just enough to quiet your nerves."

"Thank you, thank—" He drank it greedily. "—you. Are you Mr. Monetre?"

"At your service."

"I am Judge Bluett. Surrogate, you know. Hm."

"I am honored."

"Not at all, not at all. I am the one who... I drove fifty miles to see you, sir, and would have gladly done twice that. You have a wide reputation."

"I hadn't realized it," said Monetre, and thought, this deflated creature is as insincere as I am. "What can I do for you?"

"Hm. Well, now. Matter of—ah—scientific interest. I read about you in a magazine, you know. Said you know more about fr—ah, strange people, and things like that, than

anyone alive."

"I wouldn't say that," said Monetre. "I have worked with them for a great many years, of course. What was it you wanted to know?"

"Oh... the kind of thing you can't get out of reference books. Or ask any so-called scientist, for that matter; they just laugh at things that aren't in some book, somewhere."

"I have experienced that, Judge. I do not laugh readily."

"Splendid. Then I shall ask you. Namely, do you know anything about—ah—regeneration?"

MONETRE CLOAKED his eyes. Would the fool ever get to the point? "What kind of regeneration? The girdle of the nematodes? Cellular healing? Or are you talking about old-time radio receivers?"

"Please," said the judge, and made a flabby gesture. "I'm quite the layman, Mr. Monetre. You'll have to use simple language. What I want to know is—how much of a restoration is possible after a serious cut?"

"How serious a cut?"

"Hm. Call it an amputation."

"Well, now. That depends, Judge. A fingertip, possibly. A chipped bone can grow surprisingly. You—you know of a case where a regeneration has been, shall we say, a bit more than normal?"

There was a long pause. Monetre noticed that the Judge was paling. He poured him more port, and filled a glass for himself. Excitement mounted within him.

"I do know of such a case. At least, I mean... hm. Well, it seemed so to me. That is, I saw the amputation."

"An arm? A leg, perhaps, or a foot?"

"Three fingers. Three whole fingers," said the Judge. "It would seem that they grew back. And in forty-

eight hours. A well-known osteologist treated the whole thing as a great joke when I asked him about it. Refused to believe I was serious." Suddenly he leaned forward so abruptly that the loose skin of his jaw quivered. "Who was the girl who just left here?"

"An autograph hound," said Monetre in a bored tone. "A person of no importance. Do proceed."

The Judge swallowed with difficulty. "Her name is—Kay Hallowell."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so. Have you changed the subject?" asked Monetre impatiently.

"I have not, sir," the Judge answered notly. "The night before last, that girl, that monster—in good light, and right before my eyes, *chopped off three fingers of her left hand!*" He nodded, pushing his lower lip out, and sat back.

If he expected a sharp reaction, he was not disappointed. Monetre leaped to his feet and bellowed, "Havana!" He strode to the door and yelled again. "Where is that little fat—oh; there you are, Havana. Go and find that girl who just left here. Understand? Find her and bring her back. I don't care what you tell her; find her and bring her back here." He clapped his hands explosively. "Run!"

He returned to his chair, his face working. He looked at his hands, then at the judge. "You're quite sure of this."

"I am."

"Which hand?"

"The left." The Judge ran a finger around his collar. "Ah—Mr. Monetre. If that boy should bring her back—*see, why, ah—I, that is—*"

"I gather you are afraid of her."

"Now, ah—I wouldn't say that," said the Judge. "Startled, yes. Hm. Wouldn't you be?"

"No," said Monetre. "You are ly-

ing, sir."

"I? Lying?" Bluett puffed up his chest and glowered at the carny boss.

MONETRE half-closed his eyes and began ticking off items on his fingers. "It would seem that what frightened you a few minutes ago was the sight of that girl's left hand. You told the midget that the fingers had grown back. It was obviously the first time you had seen the hand regenerated. And yet you tell me that you have already consulted an osteologist about it."

"There are no lies involved," said Bluett stiffly. "True, I did see the restored hand when she stood in this doorway, and it was the first time. But I also saw her cut those fingers off, two nights ago!"

"Then why," asked Monetre, "come to me to ask questions about regeneration?" Watching the Judge flounder about for an answer, he added, "Come now, Judge Bluett. Either you have not stated your original purpose in coming here, or—you have seen a case of this regeneration before. Ah. I see that's it." His eyes began to burn. "I think you'd better tell me the whole story."

"That *isn't* it!" the Judge protested. "Really, sir, I am not enjoying this cross-questioning. I fail to see—"

Shrewdly, Monetre reached out to touch the fear which hovered so close to this wet-eyed man. "You are in greater danger than you suspect," he interrupted. "I know what that danger is, and I am probably the only man in the world who can help you. You will co-operate with me, sir, or you will leave this instant—and take the consequences." He said this with his flexible voice toned down to a soft, resonating diapason, which apparently frightened the

Judge half out of his wits. The chain of imaginary horrors which mirrored themselves on Bluett's paling face must have been colorful, to say the least. Smiling slightly, Monetre leaned back in his chair and waited.

"M-may I..." The Judge poured himself more wine. "Ah. Now, sir. I must tell you at the outset that this whole matter has been one of—ah—conjecture on my part. That is, up until I saw the girl just now. By the way—I do not want to have her see me. Could you—"

"When Havana brings her back, I'll get you out of sight. Go on."

"Good. Thank you, sir. Well, some years ago I brought a child into my house. Ugly little monster. When he was seven or eight years old, he ran away from home. I have not heard of him since. I imagine he would be nineteen or so by this time—if he's alive. And—and there seems to be some connection between him and this girl."

"What connection?" Monetre prompted.

"Well, sh-she seemed to know something about him." As Monetre shifted his feet impatiently, he blurted, "Fact is, there was a little trouble. The boy was downright rebellious. I thrashed him and shoved him into a closet. His hand—quite accidentally, you realize—his hand was crushed in the hinge of the door. Hm. Yes—very unpleasant."

"Go on."

"I've been—ah—looking, you know—that is, if that boy has grown up, he might be resentful, you understand... besides, he was a most unbalanced child, and one never knows how these things might affect a weak mind—"

"You mean you feel guilty as hell and scared to boot, and you've been watching for a young man with some

fingers missing. Fingers—get to the point! What has this to do with the girl?" Monetre's voice was a whip.

"I can't—say exactly," mumbled the Judge. "She seemed to know something about the boy. I mean, she hinted something about him—said that she was going to remind me of a way I had—hurt someone once. And then she took a cleaver and cut off her fingers."

MONETRE closed his eyes and thought, hard. "There was nothing wrong with her fingers when she was in here."

"Damn it, I know that! But I tell you, I saw, with my own eyes—"

"All right, all right. She cut them off. Now, exactly why did you come here?"

"I began thinking, that's all. When something like that happens it makes you forget everything you know and start right from scratch. What I saw was impossible, and I began thinking in a way that let anything be possible... anyth—"

"Come to the point!" roared the Maneater.

"There is none!" Bluett roared back. They glared at each other for a crackling moment. "That's what I'm trying to tell you; I don't know. I remembered that child and his crushed fingers, and there was this girl and what she did. I began wondering if she and the boy were the same... I told you 'impossible' didn't matter any more. Well, the girl had a perfectly good hand before she chopped into it. If, somehow, she was that boy, he must have grown the fingers back. If he could do it once, he could do it again. If he knew he could do it again, he wouldn't be afraid to cut them off." The judge threw up his hands and shrugged, and let his arms fall limply. "So I began to wonder what man-

ner of creature could grow fingers at will. I read about you in a magazine, and I thought, if anyone would know about such a crazy thing, Monetre would. That's all."

Monetre made wide caves of his lids, his burning dark eyes studying the Judge. "This—boy who might be a girl," he murmured. "What was his name?"

"Horton. Horthy, we called him. Vicious little scut."

"Think, now. Was there anything strange about him as a child?"

"I should say so! I don't think he was sane. Clinging to baby-toys—that sort of thing. And he had filthy habits."

"What filthy habits?"

"He was expelled from school for eating insects."

"Ah! Ants?"

"How did you know?"

Monetre rose, paced to the door and back. Excitement began to thump in his chest. "What baby-toys did he cling to?"

"Oh, I don't remember. It isn't important."

"I'll decide that!" snapped Monetre. "Think, man! If you value your life—"

"I can't think! I can't!" Bluett looked up at the Maneater, and quailed before those blazing eyes. "It was some sort of a jack-in-the-box. A hideous thing."

"What did it look like? Speak up, damn it!"

"What does it—oh, all right. It was this big, and it had a head on it like a Punch—you know, Punch and Judy. Big nose and chin. The boy hardly ever looked at it. But he had to have it near him. I threw it away one time and the doctor made me find it and bring it back. Horton almost died."

"He did, eh?" grunted Monetre

tautly, triumphantly. "Now tell me—that toy had been with him since he was born, hadn't it? And there was something about it—some sort of jewelled button, or something glittery?"

"How did you know—" Bluett began again, and again quailed under the radiation of furious, excited impatience from the carny boss. "Yes. The eyes."

Monetre flung himself on the Judge. He grasped his shoulders, shook him. "You said 'eye', didn't you? There was only one jewel?" he panted.

"Don't—don't—" wheezed Bluett, pushing weakly at Monetre's taloned hands. "I said 'eyes'. Two eyes. They were both the same. Nasty looking things. Seemed to have a light of their own."

Monetre straightened slowly, backed off. "Two of them," he breathed. "Two..."

HE CLOSED his eyes, his brain humming. Disappearing boy, fingers... fingers crushed. Girl... the right age, too... Horton. Horton... Horthy. His mind looped and wheeled back over the years. A small brown face, peaked with pain, saying "My folks called me Hortense, but everyone calls me Kiddo." Kiddo, who had arrived with a crushed hand, and had left the carnival two years ago. What had happened when she left? He had wanted something, wanted to examine her hand, and she left during the night.

That hand. When she first arrived, he had cleaned it up, trimmed away the ruined flesh, sewed it up. He had treated it every day for weeks, until the scar-tissue was fused over, and there was no further danger of infection; and then, somehow or other he had never looked at it again. Why not? Oh—Zena. Zena had always told

him how Kiddo's hand was getting along

He opened his eyes—slits, now. "I'll find him," he snarled.

There was a knock at the door, and a voice. "Maneater—"

"It's the midget," babbled Bluett, leaping up. "With the girl. What shall I—where shall—"

Monetre sent him a look which wilted him, tumbled him back in his chair. The carny boss rose and stilted to the door, opening it a crack. "Get her?"

"Gosh, Maneater, I—"

"I don't want to hear it," said Monetre in a terrible whisper. "You didn't bring her back. I sent you to get her and you didn't do it." He closed the door with great care and turned to the Judge. "Go away."

"Eh? Hm. But what about the—"

"Go away!" It was a scream. As his glare had made Bluett limp, his voice stiffened him. The Judge was on his feet and moving doorward before the scream had ceased to be a sound. He tried to speak, and succeeded only in moving his wet mouth.

"I'm the only one in the world who can help you," said Monetre; and the Judge's face showed that this easy, quiet, conversational tone was the most shocking thing of all. He went to the door and paused. Monetre said, "I will do what I can, Judge. You'll hear from me very soon, you may be sure of that."

"Ah," said the Judge. "Mm. Any thing I can do, Mr. Monetre. Call on me. Anything at all."

"Thank you. I shall certainly need your help." Monetre's bony features froze the instant he stopped speaking. Bluett fled.

Pierre Monetre stood staring at the space where the Judge's bloated face had just been. Suddenly he balled his fist and smashed it into his palm. "Zena!" said only his lips. He went

pale with fury, weak with it, and went to his desk. He sat down, put his elbows on the blotter and his chin in his hand, and began to send out waves of feral hatred and demand.

Zena!

Zena!

Here! Come Here!

CHAPTER XI

HORTY LAUGHED. He looked at his left hand, at the three stubs of fingers which rose, like unspread mushrooms, from his knuckles, touched the scar-tissue around them with his other hand, and he laughed.

He rose from the studio couch and crossed the wide room to the cheval glass, to stare at his face, to stand back and look critically at his shoulders, his profile. He grunted in satisfaction and went to the telephone in the bedroom.

"Three four four," he said. His voice was resonant, well suited to the cast of his solid chin and his wide mouth. "Nick? This is Sam Horton. Oh, fine. Sure, I'll be able to play again. The doc says I was lucky. A broken wrist usually heals pretty stiff, but this one won't. No—don't worry. Hm? About six weeks. Positively... Gold? Thanks Nick, but I'll get along. No, don't worry—I'll yell if I need any. Thanks, though. Yeah, I'll drop by every once in a while. I was in there a couple days ago. Where did you find that three-chord bubblehead you have on guitar? He does by accident what Spike Jones does on purpose. No, I didn't want to hit him. I wanted to husk him." He laughed. "I'm kidding. He's okay. Well, thanks, Nick. 'Bye.'" Chuckling, he hung up.

The doorbell rang.

Horty stopped moving. It was a freeze, the startled immobilization of a frightened animal. It was more

a controlled, relaxed split second for thought. Then he moved again, balanced and easily.

At the door he paused, staring at the lower panel. His face tightened, and a swift frown rippled on his brow. He flung the door open.

She stood crookedly in the hallway, looking up at him with her eyes. Her head was turned sidewise and a little downward. She had to strain her eyes painfully to meet his; she was only four feet tall.

She said, faintly, "Horty?"

He made a hoarse sound and knelt, pulling her into his arms, holding her with power and gentleness. "Zee... Zee, what happened? Your face, your—" He picked her up and kicked the door shut and carried her over to the studio couch, to sit with her across his knees, cradled in his arms, her head resting in the warm strong hollow of his right hand. She smiled at him. Only one side of her mouth moved. Then she began to cry, and Horty's own tears curtained from him the sight of her ravaged face.

Her sobs stopped soon, as if she were simply too tired to continue. She looked at his face, all of it, part by part. She brought her hand up and touched his hair. "Horty..." she whispered. "I loved you so much the way you were..."

"I haven't changed," he said. "I'm a big grown-up man now. I have an apartment and a job. I have this voice and these shoulders and I weigh a hundred pounds more than I did three years ago." He bent and kissed her quickly. "But I haven't changed, Zee. I haven't changed." He touched her face, a careful, feathery contact. "Do you hurt?"

"Some." She closed her eyes and wet her lips. Her tongue seemed unable to reach one corner of her mouth. "I've changed."

"You've been changed," he said, his voice shaking. "The Maneater?"

"Of course. You knew, didn't you?"

"Not really. I thought once you were calling me. Or he was... it was far away. But anyway, no one else would have—would... what happened? Do you want to tell me?"

"Oh yes. He—found out about you. I don't understand how. Your—that Armand Bluett—he's a judge or something now. He came to see the Maneater. He thought you were a girl. A big girl, I mean."

"I was, for a while." He smiled tensely.

"Oh. Oh, I see. Were you really at the carnival that day?"

"At the carnival? No. What day, Zee? You mean when he found out?"

"Yes. Four—no; five days ago. You weren't there. I don't under—" She shrugged. "Anyway, a girl came to see the Maneater and the Judge saw her and thought she was you. The Maneater thought so too. He sent Havana looking for her. Havana couldn't find her."

"And then the Maneater got hold of you."

"Mm. I didn't mean to tell him, Horty. I didn't. Not for a long time, anyway. I—forget." She closed her eyes again. Horty trembled suddenly, and then could breathe.

"I don't... remember," she said with difficulty.

"Don't try. Don't talk any more," he murmured.

"I want to. I've got to. He mustn't find you!" she said. "He's hunting for you right this minute!"

Horty's eyes narrowed and he said, "Good."

HER EYES were still closed. She said, "It was a long time. He talked very quietly. He gave me cushions and some wine that tasted

like autumn. He talked about the carnival and Solum and Gogol. He mentioned 'Kiddo' and then talked about the new flat cars and the commissary tent and the trouble with the roustabouts' union. He said something about the musicians' union and something about music and something about the guitar and then about the act we used to have. Then he was off again about the menageries and the skills and the advance men, and back again. You see? Just barely mentioning you and going away and coming back and back. All night, Horthy, all, all *night!*"

"Sh-h-h."

"He wouldn't ask me! He talked with his head turned away watching me out of the corners of his eyes. I sat and tried to sip the wine, and tried to eat when Cooky brought dinner and midnight lunch and breakfast, and tried to smile when he stopped for a minute. He didn't touch me, he didn't hit me, he didn't ask me!"

"He did later," breathed Horthy.

"Much later. I don't remember... his face over me like a moon, once. I hurt all over. He shouted. Who is Horthy, where is Horthy, who is Kiddo, why did I hide Kiddo.... I woke up and woke up. I don't remember the times I slept, or fainted, or whatever it was. I woke up with my blood in my eyes, drying, and he was talking about the ride mechanics and the power for the floodlights. I woke up in his arms, he was whispering in my ear about Bunny and Havana, they must have known what Horthy was. I woke up on the floor. My knee hurt. There was a terrible light. I jumped up with the pain of it. I ran out the door and fell down, my knee wouldn't work, it was in the afternoon and he caught me and dragged me back again and threw me on the floor and made the light again. He

had a burning glass and he gave me vinegar to drink. My tongue swelled, I—"

"Sh-h-h. Zena, honey, hush. Don't say any more."

The flat, uninflected voice went on. "I lay still when Bunny looked in and the Maneater didn't know she saw what he was doing and Bunny ran away and Havana came and hit the Maneater with a piece of pipe and the Maneater broke his neck he's going to die and I—"

Horthy's eyelids felt dry. He raised a careful hand and slapped her smartly across her undamaged cheek. "Zena! Stop it!"

At the impact she uttered a great shriek, and screamed, "I don't *know* any more, *truly* I don't!" and burst into painful, writhing sobs. Horthy tried to speak to her but could not be heard through her weeping. He stood, turned, put her down gently on the couch, ran and wrung out a cloth in cold water and bathed her face and wrists. She stopped crying abruptly and fell asleep.

Horthy watched her until her breathing assured him that she was at peace. He put his head slowly down beside hers as he knelt on the floor beside the couch. Her hair was on his forehead. Half-crossing his arms, he grasped his elbows and began to pull them. He kept the tension until his shoulders and chest throbbed with pain. He needed to be near her, would not move, yet must relieve the black tension of fury which built in him, and the work his muscles did against each other saved his sanity without the slightest movement to disturb the sleeping girl. He knelt there for a long time.

AT BREAKFAST the next morning she could laugh again. Horthy had not moved her or touched her

except to remove her shoes and cover her with a down quilt. In the small hours of the morning he had taken a pillow from the bedroom and put it on the floor between the studio couch and the door, and had stretched out to listen to her breathing and, with feline attention, to each sound from the stairway and hall outside.

He was standing, bent over her, when she opened her eyes. He said immediately, "I'm Horthy and you're safe, Zee." The spiralling panic in her eyes died unborn, and she smiled.

While she bathed, he took her clothes to a neighborhood machine laundry and in half an hour was back with them washed and dried. The food he had picked up on the way was not needed; she had breakfast well on the way when he returned—"gas-house" eggs (fried in the center of slices of bread punched out with a water glass) and crisp bacon. She took the groceries from him and scolded him. "Kippers—papaya juice—Danish ring. Horthy, that's *company* eatments!"

He smiled, more at her courage and her resilience than at her attitude. He leaned against the wall with his arms folded, watching her hobbling about the kitchen, draped from neck to heels in what was, for him, a snug-fitting bathrobe, and tried not to think of the fact that she had used it at all. He understood, though, seeing the limp, seeing what had happened to her face...

It was a gay breakfast, during which they happily played "Remember when—" which is, in the final analysis, the most entrancing game in the world. Then there was a silent time, when to each, the sight of the other was enough communication. At last Horthy asked, "How did you get away?"

Her face darkened. The effort for control was evident—and successful. Horthy said, "You'll have to tell me everything, Zee. You'll have to tell me about—me, too."

"You've found out a lot about yourself." It was not a question.

Horthy waved this aside. "How did you get away?"

The mobile side of her face twitched. She looked down at her hands, slowly lifted one, put it on and around the other, and as she talked, squeezed. "I was in a coma for days, I guess. Yesterday I woke up on my bunk, in the trailer. I knew I had told him everything—except that I knew where you were. He still thinks you are that girl.

"I heard his voice. He was at the other end of the trailer, in Bunny's room. Bunny was there. She was crying. I heard the Maneater taking her away. I waited and then dragged myself outside and over to Bunny's door. I got in. Havana was there on the bed with a stiff thing around his neck. It hurt him to talk. He said the Maneater was taking care of him, fixing his neck. He said the Maneater is going to make Bunny do a job for him." She looked up swiftly at Horthy. "He can, you know. He's a hypnotist. He can make Bunny do anything."

"I know." He considered her. "Why the hell didn't he use it on you?" he flared

She fingered her face. "He can't. He—it doesn't work like that on me. He can reach me, but he can't make me do anything. I'm too—"

"Too what?"

"Human," she said.

He stroked her arm and smiled at her. "That you are...Go on."

"I went back to my part of the trailer and got some money and a few other things and left. I don't know what the Maneater will do

when he learns I'm gone. I was very careful, Horty. I hitch-hiked fifty miles and then took a bus to Eltonville—that's three hundred miles from here—and a train from there. But I know he'll find me somehow, sooner or later. He doesn't give up."

"You're safe here," he said, and there was blued steel in his soft voice.

"It isn't me! Oh, Horty—don't you understand? It's you he's after!"

"What does he want with me? I left the carnival three years ago and it didn't seem to bother him much." He caught her eye; she was looking at him in amazement. "What is it?"

"Aren't you curious about yourself at all, Horty?"

"About myself? Well, sure. Everybody is, I guess. But about what, especially?"

SHE WAS silent a moment, thinking. Abruptly she asked, "What have you done since you left the carnival?"

"I've told you in my letters."

"The bare outlines, yes. You got a furnished room and lived there for a while, reading a lot and feeling your way. Then you decided to grow. How long did that take?"

"About eight months. I got this by mail and moved in at night so no one saw me, and changed. Well, I had to. I'd be able to get a job as a grown man. I buskined a while—you know, playing the clubs for whatever the customers would throw to me—and bought a really good guitar and went to work at the Happy Hours. When that closed I went to Club Nemo. Been there ever since, biding my time. You told me I'd know when it was time...that's always been true."

"It would be," she nodded. "Time to stop being a midget, time to go to work, time to start on Armand Bluett

—you'd know."

"Well, sure," he said, as if the fact deserved no further comment. "But look—you don't know what happened with Armand."

"No." She looked at his hand. "It has something to do with that, hasn't it?"

"It has." He inspected it and smiled. "Last time you saw my hand like this was about a year after I came to the carnival. Want to know something? I lost these fingers just eleven days ago."

"And they've grown that much?"

"It doesn't take as long as it did," he said.

"It did start slowly," she said.

He looked at her, seemed about to ask a question, and then went on. "One night at Club Nemo he walked in with her. I'd never dreamed that I'd seen them together—I know what you're thinking! I always thought of them at the same time! Ah, but that was check and balance. Good and evil. Well..." He drank coffee. "They sat right where I could hear them talk. He was the oily wolf and she was the distressed maiden. It was pretty disgusting. So, he got up to powder his nose, and I made like Lochinvar. I mixed right in. I gave her some succinct language and some carfare, and she got away, after promising him a date for the next night."

"You mean she got away from him for the moment."

"Oh no. She got clear away, by train. I don't know where she went. Well, I sat there chording that guitar and thinking hard. You said that I'd always know when it was time. I knew that night that it was time to get Armand Bluett. Time to start, that is. He gave me a treatment once that lasted for six years. The least I could do was to give him a long stretch too. So I made my plans. I put in a tough night and day." He

stopped, smiling without humor.

"Horty—"

"I'll tell it, Zee. It's simple enough. He got his date. Took the gal to a sybaritic little pest-hole he had hidden away in the slums. He was very easy to lead along the primrose paving. At the critical point his 'conquest' said a few well-chosen words about cruelty to children and left him to mull them over while staring at the three fingers she had chopped off as souvenirs."

Zena glanced at his left hand again. "Uh! What a treatment! But Horty—you got ready in one night and day?"

"You don't know the things I can do," he said. He rolled back his sleeve. "Look."

She stared at the brown, slightly hairy right forearm. Horty's face showed deep concentration. There was no tension; his eyes were quiet and his brow unfurrowed.

FOR A MOMENT the arm remained unchanged. Suddenly the hair on it moved—*writhed*. One hair fell off; another; a little shower of them, finding their way down among the small checks of the tablecloth. The arms remained steady and, like his brow, showed no tension beyond its complete immobility. It was naked now, and the creamy brown color that was typical of both him and Zena. But—was it? Was it the effect of staring with such concentration? No; it was actually paler, paler and more slender as well. The flesh on the back of the hand and between the fingers contracted until the hand was slim and tapered rather than square and thick as it had been.

"That's enough," said Horty conversationally, and smiled. "I can restore it in the same length of time. Except for the hair, of course. That will take two or three days."

"I knew about this," she breathed. "I did know, but I don't think I ever really believed...your control is quite complete?"

"Quite. Oh, there are things I can't do. You can't create or destroy matter. I could shrink to your size. I suppose. But I'd weigh the same as I do now, pretty much. And I couldn't become a twelve-foot giant overnight; there's no way to assimilate enough mass quickly enough. But that job with Armand Bluett was simple. Hard work, but simple. I compacted my shoulders and arms and the lower part of my face. Do you know I had twenty-eight toothaches the whole time? I whitened my skin. The hair was a wig, of course, and so for the female form deevine, that was taken care of by what Elliot Springs calls the 'bust-bucket and torso-twister trade.'"

"How can you joke about it?"

His voice went flat as he said, "What should I do; grind my teeth every minute? This kind of wine needs a shot of bubbles every now and then, honey, or you go out of your mind. No; what I did to Armand Bluett was just a starter. I'm making him do it himself. I didn't tell him who I am. Kay's out of the picture; he doesn't know who she is or who I am or, for that matter, who he is himself." He laughed; an unpleasant sound. "All I gave him was a powerful association with three ruined fingers from 'way back. They'll work in his sleep. The next thing I do to him will be as good—and nothing like that at all."

"You'll have to change your plans some."

"Why?"

"Kay isn't out of the picture. I'm beginning to understand now. She came out to the carnival to see the Maneater."

"Kay did? But why?"

"I don't know. Thing is, the Judge was out there at the time and saw her. I imagine he wanted to get a lead on you from the Maneater—Pierre Monetre is an authority on strange people, you know. Anyway he saw Kay—"

Horty slapped the table. "With her hand intact! Oh, how wonderful! Can you imagine what that must have been?"

"Horty, darling—it isn't all fun. Don't you see that that's what started all this—that's what made the Maneater suspect that 'Kiddo' was something else besides a girl midget? Don't you realize that the Maneater thinks you and Kay are the same one, no matter what the Judge thinks?"

"Oh, my God."

"You remember everything you hear," said Zena. "But you just don't figure things out very fast, sweetheart."

"But—but—you're getting smashed up like this... Zena, it's my fault! It's as if I'd done it to you!"

She came around the table and put her arms around him, pulling his head to her breast. "No, darling That was coming to me, from years back. If you want to blame someone—besides the Maneater—blame me. It was my fault for taking you in twelve years ago."

"What did you do it for? I never really knew."

"To keep you away from the Maneater."

"Away fr— but you kept me right next to him!"

"The last place in the world he'd think of looking."

"You're saying he was looking for me then."

"He's been looking for you ever since you were one year old. And he'll find you. He'll find you, Horty."

"I hope he does," grated Horty.

The doorbell rang.

CHAPTER XII

BOBBY DEAR, she wrote, I can't bear to think of you getting letters back with "address unknown" on them. I'm all right. That's first and foremost. I'm all right, monkey-face, and you're not to worry. Your big sister is *all right*.

I'm also all mixed up. Maybe in that nice orderly hospital this will make more sense to you. I'll try to make it short and simple.

I was working one morning at the office when that awful Judge Bluett came in. He had to wait for a few minutes before he could see old Wattles Hartford, and he used it to make his usual wet soggy string of verbal passes. My brush worked fine until the seamy old weasel got on the subject of Daddy's money. You know that we'll get it when I'm 21—unless that old partnership deal comes up again. It would have to go to court. Bluett not only was the partner—he's the Surrogate. Even if we could get him disqualified from hearing the case, you know how he could fix anyone else who might take the bench. Well, the idea was that if I would be nice and sweet to Hizzoner, in any nasty way he wanted, the will wouldn't be contested. I was terribly frightened, Bobby; you know the rest of your training has to come out of that money. I didn't know what to do. I needed time to think. I promised to meet him that night, real late, in a night-club.

Bobby, it was awful. I was just at the point of blowing up, there at the table, when the old drooler left the room for a minute. I didn't know whether to fight or run away. I was scared, believe me. All of a sudden there was somebody standing there talking to me. I think he must be my guardian angel, though he seemed

to be the guitarist in the band there at the club. Seems he had overheard the Judge talking to me. He wanted me to cut and run. I was afraid of him, too, at first, and then I saw his face. Oh, Bobby, it was such a *nice* face! He wanted to give me some money, and before I could say no he told me I could return it whenever I wanted to. He told me to get out of town right now—take a train, any train; he didn't even want to know which one. And before I could stop him he shoved \$300 into my bag and went back to the bandstand. The last thing he said was to accept a date for the next evening with the Judge. I couldn't do a thing—he'd only been there two minutes and he was talking practically every second of it. And then the Judge came back. I flapped my eyelids at the old fool like a lost woman, and cut out. I got a train to Eltonville twenty minutes later and didn't even register in a hotel when I got here. I waited around until the stores opened and bought an overnight case and a tooth brush and got myself a room. I slept a few hours and the very same afternoon I had a job in the only record shop in the place. It's \$26 a week but I can make it fine.

Meanwhile I don't know what's happening back home. I got the idea that guitar fellow would take care of the Judge one way or another. I'm sort of holding my breath until I hear something. I'm going to wait, though. We have time, and in the meantime, I'm all right. I'm not going to give you my address, honey, though I'll write often. Judge Bluett just might be able to get his hands on mail, some way. I think it pays to be careful. He's dangerous.

The only move I've made is a wild one. Did you ever have a real plover of an idea and couldn't get it out of

your head? This was one. Of course I did a lot of thinking about this fellow with the guitar. Now, maybe my wires are crossed, but every time I thought of him I thought of a kid called Horthy—Horthy *Bluett*. You were about six at the time, Bob. Maybe you don't remember about Horthy. He was a funny kid. Quiet, sort of. He got expelled from school for something fantastic—eating bugs, I think. Anyway there was a terrible mess when he got home, and Judge Bluett—though he wasn't a judge then—beat him terribly. The boy was only about seven years old at the time. I saw him that evening, out at the stoplight on the Endton turnpike where we used to live. He talked to me a minute and then I had to go in. I peeped out the window after I was inside and saw him climb on the back of a truck. It was painted red and gold and had "Monetre's Mammoth Showland" written on the side. I'll never forget it. It was one of those mental pictures that stays with you.

But I kept thinking about Horthy, here in Eltonville. The other morning I was going to work and saw the same red-and-gold business on a poster. A carnival, and it was only thirty miles from here. I suddenly got the wild idea of going there and seeing whoever ran the place, to find out if I could get a line on that Horthy. See, he was Armand Bluett's adopted kid, and if anyone on earth hates the Judge, that boy does, if he's alive to do it. If I could find him, I just might get something on the Judge and wall him off from Daddy's money with something besides my little white body. I know it sounds crazy, but it just might work.

As carnivals go, this one was real flossy. The boss lived in a big streamlined silver trailer. Bobby, I wish you could see him, just to be able to

say you'd had the experience. I can't say just what it is that's wrong with him, but he's completely inhuman. Unhuman would be more like it. Every time he spoke to me it was in a different voice. I couldn't dig him at all. But he gave me the creeps. Not the kind of creeps the Judge gives me, either. Anyway, I drew a real blank. Not only had he never heard of Horty, but he got sore when I mentioned in passing that you were studying to be a doctor. Seems he's psyched about doctors. He practically threw me out. Crazy as a quilt. Probably works in his own freak show in his spare time.

So, honey, that's the situation as far as it's gone. Going to the carnival was the only thing I could think of to do and I've done that. What next? I'll watch the home town papers for any item about His Dishonor the Surrogate, and hope for the best. As for you, don't worry your little square head about me, darling. I'm doing fine. I'm only making a few dollars a week less than I was at home and I'm a lot safer here. And the work isn't hard; some of the nicest people like music. I'm sorry I can't give you my exact address, but I do think it's better not to just now. We can let this thing ride for a year if we have to, and small loss. Work hard, baby; I'm behind you a thousand percent. I'll write often.

XXX Your loving
Big Sis Kay.

(This is the letter that Armand Bluett's hired second-story man found in Undergraduate Robert Hal-lowell's room at the State Medical School.)

CHAPTER XIII

THERE WAS a frozen silence. It rang again.

"I'll go," said Zena, rising.

"You will like hell," said Horty roughly. "Sit down."

"It's the Maneater," she whimpered. She sat down.

Horty stood where he could look through the living room at the front door. Studying it, he said, "It isn't. It's—it's—well, what do you know! Old Home Week!"

He strode out and flung the door open. "Bunny!"

"Wh-Excuse m—is this where..." Bunny hadn't changed much. She was a shade more roly-poly, and perhaps a little more timid.

"Oh, Bunny..." Zena came running unevenly out, tripped on the hem of the bathrobe. Horty caught her before she could fall. The girls hugged each other frantically, shouting tearful endearments over the rich sound of Horty's relieved laughter. "But darling, how did you find—" "It's so good to—" "I thought you were—" "You doll! I never thought I'd—"

"Cut!" roared Horty. "Bunny, come in and have some breakfast."

Startled, she looked at him, her albino eyes round. Gently he asked, "How's Havana?"

Without taking her eyes off his face, Bunny fumbled for Zena and held on. "Does he know Havana?"

"Honey," said Zena, "That's Horty!"

Bunny shot Zena a rabbit-like glance, craned to peer behind Horty, and suddenly seemed to realize just what Zena had said. "That?" she demanded, pointing. "Him?" She stared. "He's—Kiddo, too?"

Horty grinned. "That's right."

"He grew," said Bunny inanely. Zena and Horty bellowed with laughter, and, as Horty had done once so long ago, so Bunny gaped from one to the other, sensed that they were laughing with and not at

her, and joined her tinkling giggle to the noise. Still laughing; Horty went into the kitchen and called out, "You still take canned milk and half a teaspoon of sugar, Bunny?" and Bunny began to cry. Into Zena's shoulder she sobbed happily. "It is Kiddo, it is, it is..."

Horty put the steaming cup on the end table and settled down beside the girls. "Bunny, how in time did you find me?"

"I didn't find you. I found Zee. Zee, Havana's goin' to die."

"I—remember," Zee whispered. "Are you sure?"

"The Maneater did what he could. He even called in another doctor."

"He *did*? Since when has he taken to doctors?"

Bunny sipped her coffee. "You just can't know how he's changed, Zee. I couldn't believe it myself until he did that, called a doctor in, I mean. You know about m-me and Havana. You know how I feel about what the Maneater did to him. But—it's as if he had come up from under a cloud that he's lived with for years. He's really changed. Zee, he wants you to come back. He's so sorry about what happened. He's really broken up."

"Not enough," muttered Horty.

"Does he want Horty to come back too?"

"Horty—oh, Kiddo," Bunny looked at him. "He couldn't do an act now. I don't know, Zee. He didn't say."

HORTY NOTICED the swift, puzzled frown on Zena's brow. She took Bunny's upper arm and seemed to squeeze it impatiently. "Honey—start from the beginning. Did the Maneater send you?"

"Oh no. Well, not exactly. He's changed so, Zee. You don't believe me... Well, you'll see for yourself. He needs you and I came to get you

back, all by myself."

"Why?"

"Because of Havana!" Bunny cried. "The Maneater might be able to save him, don't you see? But not when he's all torn apart by what he did to you."

Zena turned a troubled face to Horty. He rose. "I'll fix you a bite to eat, Bunny," he said. A slight sidewise movement of his head beckoned to Zena; she acknowledged it with an eyelid and turned back to Bunny. "But how did you know where I was, honey?"

The albino leaned forward and touched Zena's cheek. "You poor darling. Does it hurt much?"

Horty, in the kitchen, called, "Zee! What did you do with the tabasco?"

"Be right back, Bun," said Zee. She hobbled across to the kitchen. "It should be right there on the... yes. Oh—you haven't started the toast! I'll do it, Horty."

They stood side by side at the stove, busily. Under his breath Horty said "I don't like it, Zee."

She nodded. "There's something... we've asked her twice, three times, how she found this place, and she hasn't said." She added clearly, "See? *That's* the way to make toast. Only you have to watch it."

A moment later, "Horty. How did you know who it was at the door?"

"I didn't. Not really. I knew who it *wasn't*. I know hundreds of people, and I knew it wasn't any of them." He shrugged. "That left Bunny. You see?"

"I can't do that. Nobody I know can do that. Cept maybe the Maneater." She went to the sink and clattered briskly. "Can't you tell what people are thinking?" she whispered when she came close to him again.

"Sometimes, a little. I never tried, much."

"Try now," she said, nodding toward the living room.

His face took on that unruffled, deeply occupied expression. At the same moment there was a flash of movement past the open kitchen door. Horty, who had his back to it, turned and sprang through into the living room. "Bunny!"

Bunny's pink lips curled back from her teeth like an animal's and she scuttled to the front door, whipped it open and was gone. Zena screamed. "My purse! She's got my purse!"

In two huge bounds Horty was in the hall. He pounced on Bunny at the head of the stairs. She squealed and sank her teeth into his hand. Horty clamped her head under his arm, jamming her chin against his chest. Having taken a bite, she was forced to keep it—and meanwhile was efficiently gagged.

Inside, he kicked the door closed and pitched Bunny to the couch like a sack of sawdust. Her jaw did not relax; he had to lean over her and pry them apart. She lay with her eyes red and glittering, and blood on her mouth.

"Now, what do you suppose made her go off like that?" he asked, almost casually.

Zena knelt by Bunny and touched her forehead. "Bunny. Bunny, are you all right?"

No answer. She seemed conscious. She kept her mad ruby eyes fixed on Horty. Her breath came in regular, powerful pulses like those of a slow freight. Her mouth was rigidly agape. "I didn't do anything to her," said Horty. "Just picked her up."

ZENA RESCUED her handbag from the floor and fumbled through it. Seemingly satisfied, she set it down on the coffee table. "Horty, what did you do in the kitchen just now?"

"I—sort of..." He frowned. "I thought of her face, and I made it kind of open like a door, or—well, blow away like fog, so I could see inside. I didn't see anything."

"Nothing at all?"

"She moved," he said simply.

Zena began to knead her hands together. "Try it again."

Horty went to the couch. Bunny's eyes followed him. Horty folded his arms. His face relaxed. Bunny's eyes closed immediately. Her jaw slackened. Zena barked, "Horty—be careful!"

Without moving otherwise, Horty nodded briefly.

For a moment nothing happened. Then Bunny trembled. She threw out an arm, clenched her small hand. Tears stole from under her lids, and she relaxed. In a few seconds she began to move vaguely, purposely, as if unfamiliar hands tested her motor centers. Twice she opened her eyes; once she half sat up, and then lay back. At last she released a long, shuddering sigh, pitched almost as low as Zena's voice, and lay still, breathing deeply.

"She's asleep," said Horty. "She fought me, but now she's asleep." He fell into a chair and covered his face for a moment. Zena watched him restore himself as he had restored his whitened arm earlier. He sat up briskly and said, his voice strong again, "It was more than her strength, Zee. She was full to the brim with something that wasn't hers."

"Is it all gone now?"

"Sure. Wake her and see."

"You've never done anything like this before, Horty? You seem as sure of yourself as old Iwazian." Iwazian was the carnival's photo-gallery operator. He had only to take a picture to know how good it was; he never looked at a proof.

"You keep saying things like that,"

said Horty with a trace of impatience. "There are things a man can do and things he can't. When he does something, what's the point of wondering whether or not he's actually done it? Don't you think he knows?"

"I'm sorry, Horty. I keep underestimating you." She sat beside the albino midget. "Bunny," she cooed. "Bunny..."

Bunny turned her head, turned it back, opened her eyes. They seemed vague, unfocussed. She turned them on Zena, and recognition crept into them. She looked around the room, cried out in fear. Zena held her close. "It's all right, darling," she said. "That's Kiddo, and I'm here, and you're all right now."

"But how—where—"

"Shh. Tell us what's happened. You remember the carnival? Havana?"

"Havana's goin' to die."

"We'll try to help, Bunny. Do you remember coming here?"

"Here." She looked around, as if one part of her mind were trying to catch up with the rest. "The Maneater told me to. He was nothing but eyes. After a while I couldn't even see his eyes. His voice was inside my head. 'I don't remember,' she said piteously. 'Havana's going to die.' She said this as if it were the first time.

"We'd better not ask her questions now," said Zena.

"Wrong," said Horty. "We'd better, and fast." He bent over Bunny. "How did you find this place?"

"I don't remember."

"After the Maneater talked inside your head, what did you do?"

"I was on a train." Her answers were almost vague; she did not seem to be withholding information—rather, she seemed unable to extend it. It had to be lifted out.

"Where did you go when you got off the train?"

"A bar. Uh—Club... Nemo. I asked the man where I could find the guitar player who hurt his hand."

Zena and Horty exchanged a look. "The Maneater said Zena would be with the guitar player."

"Did he say the guitar player was Kiddo? Or Horty?"

"No. He didn't say. I'm hungry."

"All right, Bunny. We'll get you a big breakfast in a minute. What were you supposed to do when you found Zena? Bring her back?"

"No. The jewels. She had the jewels. There had to be two of them. He'd give me twice what he gave Zena if I came back without them. But he'd kill me if I came with only one."

"How he's changed," Zena said, scornful horror in her voice.

"How did he know where I was?" Horty demanded.

"I don't know. Oh; that girl."

"What girl?"

"She's a blonde girl. She wrote a letter to someone. Her brother. A man got the letter."

"What man?"

"Blue. Judge Blue."

"Bluett?"

"Yes, Judge Bluett. He got the letter and it said the girl was working in a record shop in town. There was only one record shop. They found her easily."

"They found her? Who?"

"The Maneater. And that Blue. Bluett."

Horty brought his fists together. "Where is she?"

"The Maneater's got her at the carnival. Can I have my breakfast now?"

CHAPTER XIV

HORTY LEFT.

He slipped into a light coat

and found his wallet and keys, and he left. Zena screamed at him. Intensity injected raucousness into her velvet voice. She caught his arm; he did not shake her off, but simply kept moving, dragging her as if she were smoke in the suction of his movement. She turned to the table, snatched up her bag, found two glittering jewels. "Horty, wait, wait!" She held out the jewels. "Don't you remember, Horty? Junky's eyes, the jewels—they're you, Horty!"

He said, "If you need anything at all, no matter what, call Nick at Club Nemo. He's all right," and opened the door.

She hobbled after him, caught at his coat, missed her hold, staggered against the wall. "Wait, wait. I have to tell you, you're not ready, you just don't *know*!" She sobbed. "Horty, the Maneater—"

Halfway down the stairs he turned. "Take care of Bunny, Zee. Don't go out, not for anything. I'll be back soon."

And he left.

Holding the wall, Zena crept down the hall and into the apartment. Bunny sat on the couch, sobbing with fright but she stopped when she saw Zena's twisted face, and ran to her. She helped her to the easy-chair and crouched on the floor at her feet, hugging her legs, her round chin against Zena's knees. The vibrant color was gone from Zena; she stared dryly down, black eyes in a grey face.

The jewels fell from her hand and glittered on the rug. Bunny picked them up. They were warm, probably from Zena's hand. But the little hand was so cold... They were hard, but Bunny felt that if she squeezed them hard they would be soft. She put them on Zena's lap. She said nothing. She knew, somehow, that this was not the time to say any-

thing.

Zena said something. It was unintelligible; her voice was a hoarseness, nothing more. Bunny made a small interrogative sound, and Zena cleared her throat and said, "Fifteen years."

Bunny waited quietly after that, for minutes, wondering why Zena did not blink her eyes. Surely that must hurt her... she reached up presently and touched the lids. Zena blinked and stirred uneasily. "Fifteen years I've been trying to stop this from happening. I knew what he was the instant I saw those jewels. Maybe even before... but I was sure when I saw the jewels." She closed her eyes; it seemed to give more vitality to her voice, as if her incense gaze had been draining her. "I was the only one who knew. The Maneater only hoped. Even Horty didn't know. Only me. Only me. Fifteen years—"

Bunny stroked her knee. A long time passed. She became certain that Zena was asleep, and had begun to think thoughts of her own when the deep, tired voice came again.

"They're alive." Bunny looked up; Zena's hand was over the jewels. "They think and they speak. They mate. They're alive. These two are Horty."

SHE SAT up and pushed her hair back. "That's how I knew. We were in that diner, the night we found Horty. A man was robbing our truck, remember? The man put his knee on these crystals, and Horty got sick. He was indoors and a long way from the truck but he knew. Bunny, do you remember?"

"Mm-hm. Havana, he used to talk about it. Not to you, though. We always knew when you didn't want to talk, Zee."

"I do now," said Zena wearily. She wet her lips. "How long have you been with the show, Bun?"

"I guess eighteen years."

"Twenty for me. Almost that, anyway. I was with Kwell Brothers when the Maneater bought into it. He had a menagerie. He had Gogol and a pinhead and a two-headed snake and a bald squirrel. He used to do a mind-reading act. Kwell sold out for nothing. Two late springs and a tornado taught Kwell all the carny he ever wanted to know. Lean years. I stuck with the show because I was there, mostly. Just as tough there as anywhere else." She sighed, focussing for twenty years. "The Maneater was obsessed by what he called a hobby. Strange people aren't his hobby. Carny isn't his hobby. Those things are because of his hobby." She lifted the jewels and clicked them together like dice. "These are his hobby. These things make strange people. When he got a new freak—" (The word jolted both of them as she said it)—"he kept it by him. He got into show business so he could keep them and make money too, that's all. He kept them and studied them and made more of them."

"Is that really what makes strange people?"

"No! Not all of them. You know about glands and mutations, and all that. These crystals make them too, that's all. They do it—I *think* they do it—on purpose."

"I don't understand, Zee."

"Bless your heart! Neither do I. Neither does the Maneater, although he knows an awful lot about them. He can talk to them, sort of."

"How?"

"It's like his mind-reading. He puts his mind on them. He—hurts them with his mind until they do what he wants."

"What does he want them to do?"

"Lots of things. They all amount to one thing, though. He wants a— a middleman. He wants them to make something that he can talk to, give orders to. Then the middleman would turn around and make the crystals do what he wanted."

"I guess I'm sort of stupid, Zee."

"No you're not, honey...oh. Bun-ny, Bunny, I'm so glad you're here!" She pulled the albino up into the chair and hugged her fervently. "Let me talk Bun. I've got to talk! Years and years, and I haven't said a word..."

"I won't understand one word in ten, I bet."

"Yes you will, lamb. Comfy? Well...you see, these crystals are a sort of animal, kind of. They're not like any other animal that ever lived on earth. I don't think they came from anywhere on earth. The Maneater told me he sees a picture sometimes of white and yellow stars in a black sky, the way space would look away outside the earth. He thinks they drifted here."

"He told you? You mean he talked to you about them?"

"By the hour. I guess everybody has to talk to someone. He talked to me. He threatened to kill me, time and time again, if I ever said a word. But that's not why I kept it a secret. See, he was good to me, Bunny. He's mean and crazy, but he was always good to me."

"I know. We used to wonder."

"I didn't think it made any difference to anyone. Not at first, not for years. When I did learn what he was really trying to do, I *couldn't* tell anyone; no one would've believed me. All I could do was to learn as much as I could and hope I could stop him when the time came."

"Stop him from what, Zee?"

"Well—look; let me tell you a little more about the crystals. Then

you'll see. These crystals used to copy things. I mean, one would be near a flower, and it would make another flower just like it. Or a dog, or a bird. But mostly they didn't come out right. Like Gogol. Like the two-headed snake."

"Gogol is one of those?"

ZENA NODDED. "The Fish-Boy.

I think he was supposed to be a human being. No arms no legs, no teeth, and he can't sweat so he has to be kept in a tank or he'll die."

"But what do the crystals do that for?"

She shook her head. "That's one of the things the Maneater was trying to find out. There isn't anything regular about the things the crystals make, Bunny. I mean, one will look like the real thing and another will come up all strange, and another won't live at all, it's such a botch. That's why he wanted a middle-man—someone who could communicate with the crystals. He couldn't, except in flashes. He could no more understand them than you or I could understand advanced chemistry or radar or something. But one thing did not come clear. There are different kinds of crystals; some are more complicated than others, and can do more. Maybe they're all the same kind, but some are older. They never helped each other; didn't seem to have anything to do with each other.

"But they bred. The Maneater didn't know that for a long time. He knew that sometimes a pair of crystals would sometimes stop responding when he hurt them. At first he thought they were dead. He dissected one pair. And once he gave a couple to old Worble."

"I remember him! He used to be a strong man, but he was too old. He

used to help the cook, and all. He died."

"Died—that's one way to say it. Remember the things he used to whittle?"

"Oh, yes—dolls and toys and all like that."

"That's right. He made a jack-in-the-box and used these for eyes." She tossed the crystals and caught them. "He was always giving things away to kids. He was a good old man. I know what happened to that Jack-in-the-box. The Maneater never found out, but Horty told me. Somehow or other it passed from hand to hand and got into an orphanage. That's where Horty was, when he was a tiny baby. Inside of six months they were a part of Horty—or he was a part of them."

"But what about Worble?"

"Oh, maybe a year later the Maneater found out that the crystals bred, and what happened when they did. One pair made a dog; another a white rat. He realized that he had given away two big, well-developed crystals that weren't dead after all. When Worble told him he had put them in toys he made and some kid had them, he didn't know where, why, the Maneater hit him. Knocked him down. Old Worble never woke up again though it was two weeks before he died. No one knew about it but me. It was out behind the cooktent. I saw."

"I never knew," breathed Bunny, her ruby eyes wide.

"No one did," Zena repeated. "Let's have some coffee—why, honey! You never did get your breakfast, you poor baby!"

"Oh gosh" said Bunny "that's all right. Go on talking."

"Come into the kitchen," she said as she rose stiffly. "No; don't be surprised when the Maneater seems to be inhuman. He—*isn't* human."

"What is he, then?"

"I'll get to it. About the crystals; the Maneater says that the closest you can come to the way they make things—plants and animals, and so on, is to say they *dream* them. You dream sometimes. You know how the things in your dreams are sometimes sharp and clear, and sometimes fuzzy or crooked or out of proportion?"

"Yup. Where's the eggs?"

"Here, dear. Well, the crystals dream sometimes. When they dream sharp and clear they make good plants, and real rats and spiders and birds. They usually don't, though. Not when it's only one crystal that's dreaming. The Maneater says they're erotic dreams."

"What d'ye mean?"

"They dream when they're ready to mate. But some are too—young, or undeveloped, and maybe some just don't find the right mate at that time. But when they dream that way, they change molecules in a plant and make it like another plant, or change a pile of mold into a bird...no one can say what they'll choose to make, or why."

"But—why should they make things so they can mate?"

"The Maneater doesn't think they do it so they can mate, exactly," said Zena, her voice patient. She skillfully flipped an egg in the pan. "He calls it a by-product. It's as if you were in love and you were thinking of nothing but the one you love, and you made a song. Maybe the song wouldn't be about your lover at all. Maybe it'd be about a brook, or a flower, or something. The wind. Maybe it wouldn't be a whole song, even. That song would be a by-product. See?"

"Oh. And the single crystals make things—even complete things—like Tin Pan Alley makes songs."

"Something like it." Zena smiled.

It was the first smile in a long while. "Sit down, honey; I'll bring the toast. Now, when two crystals mate, something different happens. They make a whole thing. But they don't make it from just anything the way the single crystals do. First they seem to die together. For weeks they lie like that. The Maneater says there's something between them as strong as atomic binding force—but it can't be felt or measured. After that they begin a together-dream. They find something near them that's alive, and they make it over. He says they replace it, cell by cell. You can't see the change going on in the thing they're replacing. It might be a dog; the dog will keep on eating and running around; it will howl at the moon and chase cats. But one day—I don't know how long it takes—it will be completely replaced, every bit of it."

"Then what?"

"Then it can change itself—if it ever thinks of changing itself. It can be almost anything if it wants to be."

BUNNY stopped chewing, thought, swallowed, and asked, "Change how?"

"Oh, it could get bigger or smaller. Grow more limbs. Go into a funny shape—thin and flat, or round like a ball. If it's hurt it can grow new limbs. And it could do things with thought that we can't even imagine. Bunny, did you ever read about werewolves?"

"Those nasty things that changes from wolves to men and back again?"

Zena sipped coffee. "Mmm. Well, those are mostly legends, but they could have started when someone saw a change like that."

"You mean these crystal-things aren't new on earth?"

"Oh, heavens no! The Maneater

says they're arriving and living and breeding and dying here all the time."

"Just to make strange people and werewolves," breathed Bunny in wonder.

"No, darling! Making those things is nothing to them! They live a life of their own. Even the Maneater doesn't know what they do, what they think about. The things they make are absent-minded things, like doodles on a piece of paper that you throw away. But the Maneater thinks he could understand them if he could get that middleman."

"What's he want to understand a crazy thing like that for?"

Zena's small face darkened. "When I found that out, I began listening carefully—and hoping that some day I could stop him, Bunny, the Maneater hates people. He hates and despises all people."

"Oh, yes," said Bunny.

"Even now, with the poor control he has over the crystals, he's managed to make some of them do what he wants. Bunny, he's planted crystals in swampland with malaria mosquito eggs all around them. He's picked up poisonous coral snakes in Florida and planted them in Southern California. Things like that. It's one of the reasons he keeps the carnival. It covers the country, the same route year after year. He goes back and back, finding the crystals he's planted, seeing how much harm they've done to people. He keeps finding more. They look like pebbles or clods until they're cleaned."

"Oh, how—how awful!" Tears brightened Bunny's eyes. "He ought to be—killed!"

"I don't know if he can be killed."

"You mean he's one of those things from the two crystals?"

"Do you think a human being could

do what he does?"

"But—what would he do if he got that middleman?"

"He'd train him up. Those creatures that are made by two crystals, they're whatever they think they are. The Maneater would tell the middleman that he was a servant; he was under orders. The middleman would believe him, and think that of himself. Through him the Maneater would have real power over the crystals. He could probably even make them mate, and dream-together any horrible thing he wanted. He could spread disease and plant-blight and poison until there wouldn't be a human being left on earth! And the worst thing about it is that the crystals don't even seem to want that! They're satisfied to go on as they are, making a flower or a cat once in a while, and thinking their own thoughts, and living whatever strange sort of life they live. They aren't after people! They just don't care."

"Oh, Zee! And you've been carrying all this around with you for years!" Bunny ran around the table and kissed her. "Oh, baby, why didn't you tell someone?"

"I didn't dare, sweetheart. They would think I was out of my mind. And besides—there's Horthy."

"What about Horthy?"

"**H**ORTHY WAS a baby in an orphanage when, somehow, that toy with the crystal eyes was brought in. The crystals picked on him. It all fits. He told me that when the jack-in-the-box—he called it Junky—was taken away from him, he almost died. The doctors there thought it was some kind of psychosis. It wasn't, of course; the child was in some strange bondage to the married crystals and could not exist away from them. It seems that it was

far simpler to leave the toy with the child—it was an ugly toy, Horty tells me—than to try to cure the psychosis. In any case, Junky went along with Horty when he was adopted—by that Armand Bluett, incidentally; that judge."

"He's awful! He looks all soft and—and wet."

"The Maneater has been looking for one of those twin-crystal creatures for twenty years or more. He's never found one. He had a couple, but animals, not people. Maybe he had passed right by some without recognizing it. He can find crystals pretty easily, you know; he gets other crystals to help him. That's why he walks in the woods and goes out in swamps and grassland so much. When he finds anything a crystal might have made, he brings it in and tests it. He can tell by its cell structure whether it came from a crystal. Blood, too. Then he works on it with his mind. He is sure that if it's a twin-crystal product, he'll know. For one thing, it'd be low on formic acid. It might be anything—an insect or a fish or a tree. He'd give everything he owns in the world for Horty—a human. Not a human; Horty isn't human and hasn't been since he was a year old. But you know what I mean."

"And that would be his middle-man?"

"That's right. So when I saw what Horty was, I jumped at the chance to hide him in the last place in the world Pierre Monetre would think of looking—right under his nose."

"Oh, Zee! What a terrible chance to take! He was bound to find out!"

"It wasn't too much of a chance. The Maneater can't read my mind. He can prod it; he can call me in a strange way; but he can't find out what's in it. Not the way Horty did

on you before. The Maneater hypnotized you to make you steal the jewels and bring them back. Horty went right into your mind and cleared all that away."

"I—I remember. It was crazy."

"I kept Horty by me and worked on him constantly. I read everything I could get my hands on and fed it to him. Everything, Bunny—comparative anatomy and history and music and mathematics and chemistry—everything I could think of that would help him to a knowledge of human things. There's an old Latin saying, Bunny: *Cogito ergo sum*—'I think, therefore I am.' Horty is the essence of that saying. When he was a midget he believed he was a midget. He didn't grow. He never thought of his voice changing. He never thought of applying what he learned to himself; he let me make all his decisions for him. He digested everything he learned in a reservoir with no outlet, and it never touched him until he decided himself that it was time to use it. He has eidetic memory, you know."

"What's that?"

"Camera memory. He remembers perfectly everything he has seen or read or heard. When his fingers began to grow back—they were smashed hopelessly, you know—I kept it a secret. That was the one thing that would have told the Maneater what Horty was. Humans can't regenerate fingers. Single-crystal creatures can't either. The Maneater used to spend hours in the dark, in the menagerie tent, trying to force the bald squirrel to grow hair, or trying to put gills on Gogol the Fish Boy, by prodding at them with his mind. If any of them had been twin-crystal creatures, they would have repaired themselves."

"I think I see. And what you were

doing was to convince Horthy that he was human?"

"THAT'S RIGHT. He had to identify himself first and foremost with humanity. I taught him guitar for that reason, after his fingers grew back, so that he could learn music quickly and thoroughly. You can learn more music theory in a year on guitar than you can in three on a piano, and music is one of the most human of human things. . . He trusted me completely because I never let him think for himself."

"I—never heard you talk like this before, Zee. Like out of books."

"I've been playing a part too, sweet," said Zena gently. "First, I had to keep Horthy hidden until he had learned everything I could teach him. Then I had to plan some way to make him stop the Maneater, without danger of the Maneater's making a servant of him."

"How could he do that?"

"I think the Maneater is a single-crystal Thing. I think if Horthy could only learn to use that mental whip that the Maneater has, he could destroy him with it. If I should kill the Maneater with a bullet, it won't kill his crystal. Maybe that crystal will mate, later, and produce him all over again—with all the power that a twin-crystal creature has."

"Zee, how do you know the Maneater isn't a twin-crystal thing?"

"I don't," Zee said bleakly. "If that's the case, then I can only pray that Horthy's estimate of himself as a human being is strong enough to fight what the Maneater wants to make of him. Hating Armand Bluett is a human thing. Loving Kay Hallowell is another. Those are two things that I needled him with, drilled into him, teased him about, until they became part of his blood and bone."

Bunny was silent before this bitter flood of words. She knew that, in her asexual midget's way, Zena loved Horthy; that she was enough of a woman to feel Kay Hallowell's advent as a deep menace to her; that she had fought and won against the temptation to steer Horthy away from Kay; and that, more than anything else, she was face to face with terror and remorse now that her long campaign had come to a head.

She watched Zena's proud, battered face, the lips which drooped slightly on one side, the painfully canted head, the shoulders squared under the voluminous robe, and she knew that here was a picture she would never forget. Humanity is a concept close to the abnormals, who are wistfully near it, who state their membership with aberrated breath, who never cease to stretch their stunted arms toward it. Bunny's mind struck a medallion of this torn and courageous figure—a token and a tribute.

Their eyes met, and slowly Zena smiled. "Hi, Bunny. . ."

Bunny opened her mouth and coughed, or sobbed. She put her arms around Zena and snuggled her chin into the cool hollow of the dark-skinned neck. She closed her eyes tight to squeeze away tears. When she opened them she could see again.

She saw, over Zena's, shoulder through the kitchen door, out in the living room, a huge, gaunt figure. Its lower lip swung loosely as it bent over the coffee table. Its exquisite hands plucked up one, two jewels. It straightened, sent her a look of dull pity from its sage-green face, and went silently out.

"Bunny, darling, you're hurting me."

Those jewels are Horthy, Bunny thought. Now I'll tell her Solum has taken them back to the Maneater.

Her face and her voice were as dry and as white as chalk as she said, "You haven't been hurt yet..."

CHAPTER XV

HORTY POUNDED up the stairs and burst into his apartment. "I'm walking under water," he gasped. "Every damn thing I reached for is snatched away from me. Everything I do, everywhere I go, it's too early or too late or—" Then he saw Zena on the easy-chair, her eyes open and staring, and Bunny crouched at her feet. "What's the matter here?"

Bunny said, "Solum came in when we were in the kitchen and took the jewels and we couldn't do anything and Zena hasn't said a word since and I'm scared and I don't know what to do—hoo..." and she began to cry.

"Oh Lord." He was across the room in two strides. He lifted Bunny up and hugged her briefly and set her down. He knelt beside Zena. "Zee—"

She did not move. Her eyes were all pupil, windows to a too-dark night. He tilted her chin up and fixed his gaze on her. She trembled and then cried out as if he had burned her, twisted into his arms. "Don't, don't..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Zee. I didn't know it would hurt you."

She leaned back and looked up at him, seeing him at last. "Horty you're all right..."

"Well, sure. What's this about Solum?"

"He got the crystals. Junky's eyes."

Bunny whispered, "For twelve years she's been keeping them away from the Maneater, Horty; and now—"

"You think the Maneater sent him for them?"

"Must have. I guess he must have followed me, and waited until he saw you leave. He was in here and out again before we could do so much as turn and look."

"Junky's eyes..." There was the time he had almost died, as a child, when Armand threw the toy away. And the time when the tramp had crushed them under his knee, and Horty, in the lunch room two hundred feet away, had felt it. Now the Maneater might...oh, no. This was too much.

Bunny suddenly clapped her hand to her mouth. "Horty—I just thought—the Maneater wouldn't've sent Solum by himself. He wanted those jewels...you know how he gets when he wants something. He can't bear to wait. He must be in town right now!"

"No." Zena rose stiffly. "No, Bun. Unless I'm quite wrong, he was here and is on his way back to the carnival. If he thinks Kay Hallowell is Horty, he'll want to have the jewels where he can work on them and watch her at the same time. I'll bet he's burning up the road back to the carnival this minute."

Horty moaned. "If only I hadn't gone out! I might've been able to stop Solum, maybe even get to the Maneater and—Damn it! Nick's car was in the garage; first I had to find Nick and borrow it, and then I had to get a parked truck out from in front of the garage, and then there was no water in the radiator, and—oh, you know. Anyway, I have the car now. It's downstairs. I'm going to take off right now. In three hundred miles I ought to be able to catch up with...how long ago was Solum here?"

"An hour or so. You just can't, Horty. And what will happen to you when he goes to work on those

jewels, I hate to think."

Horty took out keys, tossed and caught them. "Maybe," he said suddenly, "Just maybe we can—" He dove for the phone.

Listening to him talk rapidly into the instrument, Zena turned to Bunny. "A plane. But of course!"

Horty put the phone down, looking at his watch. "If I can get out to the airport in twelve minutes I can get a feeder flight."

"You mean 'we'."

"You're not coming. This is my party, from here on out. You kids have been through enough."

Bunny was pulling on her light coat. "I'm going back to Havana," she said grimly, and for all her baby features, her face showed case-hardened purpose.

"You're not going to leave me here," said Zena flatly. She went for her coat. "Don't argue with me, Horty. I have a lot to tell you, and maybe a lot to do."

"But—"

"I think she's right," said Bunny. "She has a lot to tell you."

THE PLANE was wobbling out to the runway when they arrived. Horty drove right out onto the tarmac, horn blasting, and it waited. And after they were settled in their seats, Zena talked steadily. They were ten minutes away from their destination when she was finished.

After a long, thoughtful pause, Horty said, "So that's what I am."

"It's a big thing to be," said Zena.

"Why didn't you tell me all this years ago?"

"Because there were too many things I didn't know. There still are... I didn't know how much the Maneater might be able to dig out of your mind if he tried; I didn't know how deep your convictions on your-

self had to go before they settled. All I tried to do was to have you accept, without question, that you were a human being, a part of humanity, and grow up according to that idea."

He turned on her suddenly. "Why did I eat ants?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps even two crystals can't do a perfect job. Anyways your formic acid balance was out of adjustment. (Did you know the French word for 'ant' is *fourmi*? They're full of the stuff.) Some kids eat plaster because they need calcium. Some like burned cake for the carbon. If you had an imbalance, you can bet it would be an important one."

The flaps went down; they felt the braking effect. "We're coming in. How far is the carnival from here?"

"About four miles. We can get a cab."

"Zee, I'm going to leave you outside the grounds somewhere. You've been through too much."

"I'm going in with you," said Bunny firmly. "But Zee— I think he's right. Please stay outside until—until it's over."

"What are you going to do?"

He spread his hands. "Whatever I can. Get Kay out of there. Stop Armand Bluett from whatever filthy thing he plans to do with her and her inheritance. And the Maneater... I don't know, Zee. I'll just have to play it as it comes. But I have to do it. You've done all you can. Let's face it; you're not fast on your feet just now. I'd have to keep looking out for you."

"He's right, Zee. Please—" said Bunny.

"Oh, be careful, Horty—*please* be careful!"

No bad dream can top this, Kay thought. Locked in a trailer with a

frightened wolf and a dying midget, with a madman and a freak due back any minute. Wild talk about missing fingers, about living jewels, and about—wildest of all—Kay not being Kay, but someone or something else.

Havana moaned. She wrung out a cloth and sponged his head again. Again she saw his lips tremble and move, but words stuck in his throat, gurgled and fainted there. "He wants something," she said. "Ob, I wish I knew what he wanted! I wish I knew, and could get it quickly..."

Armand Bluett leaned against the wall by the window, one sack-suited elbow thrust through it. Kay knew he was uncomfortable there and that, probably, his feet hurt. But he wouldn't sit down. He wouldn't get away from the window. Oh no. He might want to yell for help. Old Crawly-Fingers was suddenly afraid of her. He still looked at her wet-eyed and drooling, but he was terrified. Well, let it go. No one likes having his identity denied, but in this case it was all right with her. Anything to keep a room's-breadth between her and Armand Bluett.

"I wish you'd leave that little monster alone," he snapped. "He's going to die anyway."

She turned a baleful glance on him and said nothing. The silence stretched, punctuated only by the Judge's painful foot-shifting. Finally he said, "When Mr. Monetre gets back with those crystals, we'll soon find out who you are. And don't tell me again that you don't know what all this is about. *Who was that guitar player?*" he snapped.

She sighed. "I don't know. I wish you'd stop shouting like that. You can't jolt information out of me that I haven't got. And besides, this little fellow's sick."

THE JUDGE snorted, and moved even closer to the window. She had an impulse to go over there and growl at him. He'd probably go right through the wall. But Havana moaned again. "What is it, fellow? What is it?"

Then she stiffened. Deep within her mind she sensed a presence, a concept connected somehow with delicate, sliding music, with a broad pleasant face and a good smile. It was as if a question had been asked of her, to which she answered silently, *I'm here. I'm all right—so far.*

She turned to look at the Judge, to see if he shared the strange experience. He seemed tense. He stood with his elbow on the sill, nervously buffing his nails on his lapel.

And a hand came through the window.

It was a mutilated hand. It rose into the trailer like the seeking head and neck of a waterfowl, passed in over Armand's shoulder and spread itself in front of his face. The thumb and index fingers were intact. The middle finger was clubbed; the other two were mere buttons of scar-tissue.

Armand Bluett's eyebrows were two stretched semi-circles, bristling over bulging eyes. The eyes were as round as the open mouth. His upper lip turned back and upward, almost covering his nostrils. He made a faint sound, a retch, a screech, and dropped.

The band disappeared through the window. There were quick footsteps outside, around to the door. A knock. A voice. "Kay. Kay Hallowell. Open up."

Inanely, she quavered, "Wb—who is it?"

"Horty." The doorknob rattled. "Hurry. The Maneater's due back, but quick."

"Horty. I—the door's locked."

"The key must be in the Judge's pocket. Hurry."

She went with reluctant speed to the prone figure. It lay on its back, the head propped against the wall, the eyes screwed shut in a violent psychic effort to shut out the world. In the left jacket pocket were keys on a ring—and one single. This she took. It worked.

Kay stood blinking at sunlight. "Horty."

"That's right." He came in, touched her arm, grinned. "You shouldn't write letters. Come on, Bunny."

Kay said, "They thought I knew where you were."

"You do." He turned away from her and studied the supine form of Armand Bluett. "What a sight. Something the matter with his stomach?"

Bunny had arrowed to the bunk, knelt beside it. "Havana... Oh Havana..."

Havana lay stiffly on his back. His eyes were glazed and his lips pouted and dry. Kay said, "Is—is he ... I've done what I could. He wants something. I'm afraid he—" She went to the bedside.

Horty followed. Havana's pale chubby lips slowly relaxed, then pursed themselves. A faint sound escaped. Kay said, "I wish I knew what he wants!" Bunny said nothing. She put her hands on the hot cheeks, gently, but as if she would wrest something up out of him by brute force.

Horty frowned. "Maybe I can find out," he said.

Kay saw his face relax, smoothed over by a deep placidity. He bent close to Havana. The silence was so profound, suddenly, that the carnival

noises outside seemed to wash in on them, roaring.

The face Horty turned to Kay a moment later was twisted with grief. "I know what he wants. There may not be time before the Maneater gets here... hut— There's got to be time," he said decisively. He turned to Kay. "I've got to go to the other end of the trailer. If he moves—" indicating the Judge— "hit him with your shoe. Preferably with a foot in it." He went out, his hand, oddly, on his throat, kneading.

"What's he going to do?"

Bunny, her eyes fixed on Havana's comatose face, answered, "I don't know. Something for Havana. Did you see his face when he went out? I don't think Havana's going to— to—"

From the partition came the sound of a guitar, the six open strings brushed lightly. The A was dropped, raised a fraction. The E was flatted a bit. Then a chord...

SOMEWHERE a girl began to sing to the guitar. "Stardust." The voice was full and clear, a lyric soprano, pure as a boy's voice. Perhaps it was a boy's voice. There was a trace of vibrato at the ends of the phrases. The voice sang to the lyric, just barely trailing the beat, not quite ad lib, not quite stylized, and as free as breathing. The guitar was not played in complicated chords, but mostly in swift and delicate runs in and about the melody.

Havana's eyes were still open, and still he did not move. But his eyes were wet now, and not glazed, and gradually he smiled. Kay knelt beside Bunny. Perhaps she knelt only to be nearer... Havana whispered, through his smile, "Kiddo."

When the song was done, his face relaxed. Quite clearly he said "Hey."

There was a world of compliment in the single syllable. After that, and before Horty came back, he died.

Entering, Horty did not even glance at the cot. He seemed to be having trouble with his throat. "Come on," he said hoarsely. "We've got to get out of here."

They called Bunny and went to the door. But Bunny stayed by the bunk, her hands on Havana's cheeks, her soft round face set.

"Bunny, come on. If the Maneater comes back—"

There was a step outside, a thump against the wall of the trailer. Kay wheeled and looked at the suddenly darkened window. Solum's great sad face filled it. Just then Horty screamed shrilly and dropped writhing to the floor. Kay turned to face the opening door.

"Good of you to wait," said Pierre Monetre, looking about.

ZENA HUDDLED on the edge of the lumpy motel bed and whimpered. Horty and Bunny had been gone for nearly two hours; for the past hour, depression had grown over her until it was like bitter incense in the air, like clothes of lead sheeting on her battered limbs. Twice she had leapt up and paced impatiently, but her knee hurt her and drove her back to the bed, to punch the pillow impotently, to lie passive and watch the doubts circling endlessly about her. Should she have told Horty about himself? Should she not have given him more cruelty, more ruthlessness, about more things than revenging himself on Armand Bluett? How deep had her training gone in the malleable entity which was Horty? Could not Monetre, with his fierce, directive power undo her twelve years' work in an instant?

She knew so little; she was, she felt, so small a thing to have undertaken the manufacture of a—a human being.

She wished, fiercely, that she could burrow her mind into the strange living crystals, as the Maneater tried to do, but completely, so that she could find the rules of the game, the facts about a form of life so alien that logic seemed not to work on it at all. The crystals had a rich vitality; they created, they bred, they felt pain; but to what end did they live? Crush one, and the others seemed not to mind. And why, why did they make these "dream-things" of theirs, laboriously, cell by cell—sometimes to create only a horror, a freak, an unfinished unfunctional monstrosity, sometimes to copy a natural object so perfectly that there was no real distinction between the copy and its original; and sometimes, as in Horty's case, to create something new, something that was not a copy of anything but, perhaps, a mean, a living norm on the surface, and a completely fluid, polymorphic being at its core? What was their connection with these creations? How long did a crystal retain control of its product—and how, having built it, could it abruptly leave it to go its own way? And when the rare syzygy occurred by which two crystals made something like Horty—when would they release him to be his own creature...and what would become of him then?

Perhaps the Maneater had been right when he had described the creatures of the crystals as their dreams—solid figments of their alien imaginations, built any way they might occur, patterned on partial suggestions pictured by faulty memories of real objects. She knew—the Maneater had happily demonstrat-

ed—that there were thousands perhaps millions of the crystals on earth, living their strange lives, as oblivious to humanity as humanity was to them, for the life-cycles, the purposes and aims of the two species were completely separate. Yet—how many men walked the earth who were not men at all; how many trees, how many rabbits, flowers, amoebae, sea-worms, redwoods, eels and eagles grew and flowered, swam and hunted and stood among their prototypes with none knowing that they were an alien dream having, apart from the dream, no history?

"Books," Zena snorted. The books she had read! She had snatched everything she could get her hands on that would give her the slightest lead on the nature of the dreaming crystals. And for every drop of information she had gained (and passed on to Horty) about physiology, biology, comparative anatomy, philosophy, history, theosophy and psychology, she had taken in a gallon of smug certitude, of bland assumptions that humanity was the peak of creation. The answers...the books had answers for everything. A new variety of manglewort appears, and some learned pundit places his finger alongside his nose and pronounces, "Mutation!" Sometimes, certainly. But—always? What of the hidden crystal-creature dreaming in a ditch, absently performing, by some strange telekinesis, a miracle of creation?

She loved, she worshipped Charles Fort, who refused to believe that any answer was the only answer.

She looked at her watch yet again, and whimpered. If she only knew; if she could only guide him...if she could get guidance herself, somewhere, somewhere...

THE DOORKNOB turned. Zena froze, staring at it. Something heavy leaned, or pressed against, the door. There was no knock. The crack between door and frame, high up, widened. Then the bolt let go, and Solum burst into the room.

His loose-skinned, grey-green face and dangling lower lip seemed to pull more than usual at the small, inflamed eyes. He took a half-step back to swing the door closed behind him, and crossed the room to her, his great arms away from his body as if to check any move she might make.

His presence told her some terrible news. No one knew where she was but Horty and Bunny, who had left her in this tourist cabin before they crossed the highway to the carnival. And when last heard of, Solum had been on the road with the Maneater.

So—the Maneater was back, and he had contacted Bunny or Horty, or both, and, worst of all, he had been able to extract information that neither would give willingly.

She looked up at him out of a tearing flurry of deadening resignation and mounting terror. "Solum—"

His lips moved. His tongue passed over his brilliant pointed teeth. He reached for her, and she shrank back.

And then he dropped to his knees. Moving slowly, he took her tiny foot in one of his hands, bent over it with an air that was, unmistakably, reverence.

He kissed her instep, ever so gently, and he wept. He released her foot and crouched there, immersed in great noiseless shuddering sobs.

"But, *Solum*—" she said, stupidly. She put out a hand and touched his wet cheek. He pressed it closer. She watched him in utter astonishment. Long ago she used to wonder at what went on in the mind behind this hideous face, a mind locked in a si-

lent, speechless universe, with all the world pouring in through the observant eyes and never an expression, never a conclusion or an emotion coming out.

"What is it, Solum?" she whispered. "Horty—"

He looked up and nodded rapidly. She stared at him. "Solum—can you hear?"

He seemed to hesitate; then he pointed to his ear, and shook his head. Immediately he pointed to his brow, and nodded.

"Oh-h-h..." Zena breathed. For years there had been idle arguments in the carnival as to whether the Alligator-skinned Man was really deaf. There was instance after instance to prove both that he was, and that he was not. The Maneater knew, but had never told her. He was—telepathic! She flushed as she thought of it, the times that carnies, half-kidding, had hurled insults at him; worse, the horrified reactions of the customers.

"But— "What's happened? Have you seen Horty? Bunny?"

His head bobbed twice.

"Where are they? Are they safe?"

He thumbed toward the carnival, and shook his head gravely.

"Th-the Maneater's got them?"

Yes.

"And the girl?"

Yes.

She hopped off the bed, strode away and back, ignoring the pain. "He sent you here to get me?"

Yes.

"But why don't you scoop me up and take me back, then?"

No answer. He motioned feebly. She said, "Let's see. You took the jewels when he asked you to..."

Solum tapped his forehead, spread his hands. Suddenly she understood. "He hypnotized you then."

Solum nodded vehemently.

"But not this time." She could imagine it; the Maneater, wanting the crystals, plotting carefully; sending Bunny with orders to inquire for the guitarist's address at Club Nemo. And then, as a double check, putting Solum on her trail. He would give hypnotic commands to them both for a job that detailed; but now, busy in—in some fiendish work over Horty, he would extract the information about where she was—most likely from Bunny—and simply snap at Solum—"She's at that motor-court down the road. Go get her!"

"Then you really didn't want to steal the crystals for him."

SOLUM SHRUGGED; she understood that it had been a matter of indifference to him. But this time it was different. Something had happened to change his mind, and drastically.

"Oh, I wish you could talk!"

He made anxious, lateral circular motions with his right hand. "Oh, of course!" she exploded. She limped to the splintery bureau and her purse. She found her pen; she had no paper but her checkbook. "Here, Solum. Hurry. Tell me!"

His huge hands enveloped the pen, completely hid the narrow paper. He wrote rapidly while Zena wrung her hands in impatience. At last he handed it to her. His script was delicate, almost microscopic, and as neat as engraving.

He had written, tersely, "M. hates people. Me too. Not so much. M. wants help, I helped him. M. wanted Horty so he could hurt more people. I didn't care. Still helped. People never liked me.

"I am human, a little. Horty is not human at all. But when Havana was dying, he wanted Kiddo to sing.

Horty read his mind. He knew. There was no time. There was danger. Horty knew. Horty didn't save himself. He made Kiddo's voice. He sang for Havana. Too late then. M. came. Caught him. Horty did this so Havana could die happy. It didn't help Horty. Horty knew; did it anyway. Horty is love. M. is hate. Horty more human than I am. I am ashamed. You made Horty. Now I help you."

Zena read it, her eyes growing very bright. "Havana's dead, then."

Solum made a significant gesture, twisting his head in his hands, pointing to his neck, snapping his fingers loudly. He shook his fist at the carnival.

"Yes. The Maneater killed him. ...How did you know about the song?"

Solum tapped his forehead.

"Oh. You got it from Bunny, and the girl Kay; from their minds."

Zena sat on the bed, pressing her knuckles hard against her cheekbones. Think, think...oh, for guidance; for a word of advice about these alien things! The Maneater, crazed, inhuman; surely a warped crystalline product; there must be some way of stopping him. If only she could contact one of the jewels and ask it what to do...surely it would know. If only she had the "middle-man", the interpreter, that the Maneater had been seeking all these years...

The middleman! "I'm blind, I'm stone blind and stupid!" she gasped. All these years her single purpose had been to keep Horty away from the crystals; he must have nothing to do with them, lest the Maneater use him against humanity. But Horty was what he was; he was the very thing the Maneater wanted; he was the one who could contact the crys-

tals. There must be a way in which the crystals could destroy what they created!

But would the crystals tell him of such a thing?

They wouldn't have to, she decided instantly. All Horty would have to do would be to understand the strange mental mechanism of the crystals, and the method would be clear to him.

If only she could tell him! Horty learned quickly, thought slowly; for eidetic memory is the enemy of methodical thought. Ultimately he would think of this himself—but by then he might be the Maneater's crippled slave. What could she do? Write him a note? He might not even be conscious to read it! If only she were a telepath... Telepath!

"Solum," she said urgently, "Can you—speak, up here" (she touched her forehead) as well as hear?"

He shook his head. But at the same time he picked up the check on which he had written and pointed to a word.

"Horty. You can speak to Horty?"

He shook his head, and then made outgoing motions from his brow. "Oh," she said. "You can't project it, but he can read it if he tries." He nodded eagerly.

"Good!" she said. She drew a deep breath; she knew, at last, exactly what she must do. "Take me back there, Solum. You've caught me. I'm frightened, I'm angry. Get to Horty. You can think of a way. Get to him and think *hard*. Think: *Ask the crystals how to kill one of their dream-things. Find out from the crystals. Got that, Solum?*"

THE WALL had gone up years ago, when Horty came to the very simple conclusions that the peremptory summonses which awak-

ened him at night in his bunk were for Zena, and not for him. *Cogito, ergo sum*; the wall, once erected, stood untended for years, until Zena suggested that he try reaching into the hypnotized Bunny's mind. The wall had come down for that; it was still down when he used his new sense to locate the trailer in which Kay was a prisoner, and when he sought the nature of Havana's dying wish. His sensitive mind was therefore open and unguarded when the Maneater arrived and hurled at him his schooled and vicious lance of hatred. Horthy went down in flames of agony.

In ordinary terms, he was completely unconscious. He did not see Solum catch the fainting Kay Hallowell and tuck her under his long arm while his other hand darted out to snatch up soft-faced, tender-hearted Bunny, who fought and spit as she dangled there. He had no memory of being carried to Monetre's big trailer, of the tottering advent, a few minutes later, of a shaken and murderous Armand Bluett. He was not aware of Monetre's quick hypnotic control of hysterical Bunny, nor of her calm flat voice revealing Zena's whereabouts, nor of Monetre's crackling command to Solum to go to the motor court and bring Zena back. He did not hear Monetre's blunt order to Armand Bluett: "I don't think I need you and the girl for anything any more. Stand back there out of the way." He did not see Kay's sudden dash for the door, nor the cruel blow of Armand Bluett's fist which sent her sliding back into the corner as he snarled, "I need *you* for something, sweetheart, and you're not getting out of my sight again."

But the blacking out of the ordinary world revealed another. It was not strange; it had coexisted with

the other. Horthy saw it now only because the other was taken away.

There was nothing about it to relieve the utter lightlessness of oblivion. In it, Horthy was immune to astonishment and quite without curiosity. It was a place of flickering impressions and sensations; of pleasure in an integration of abstract thought, of excitement at the approach of one complexity to another, of engrossing concentration in distant and exoteric constructions. He felt the presence of individuals, very strongly indeed; the liaison between them was non-existent, except for the rare approach of one to another and, somewhere far off, a fused pair which he knew were exceptional. But for these, it was a world of self-developing entities, each evolving richly according to its taste. There was a sense of permanence, of life so long that death was not a factor, save as an aesthetic termination. Here there was no hunger, no hunting, no co-operation, and no fear; these things had nothing to do with the bases of a life like this. Basically trained to accept and to believe in that which surrounded him, Horthy delved not at all, made no comparisons, and was neither intrigued nor puzzled.

Presently he sensed the tentative approach of the force which had blasted him, used now as a goad rather than as a spear. He rebuffed it easily, but moved to regain consciousness so that he might deal with the annoyance.

HE OPENED his eyes and found them caught and held by those of Pierre Monetre, who sat at his desk facing him. Horthy was sprawled back in an easy-chair, his head propped in the angle of the back and a small rounded wing. The Maneater was radiating nothing. He simply

watched, and waited.

Horty closed his eyes, sighed, moved his jaws as a man does on awakening.

"Horty." The Maneater's voice was mellow, friendly. "My dear boy. I have looked forward so long to this moment. This is the beginning of great things for us two."

Horty opened his eyes again and looked about. Bluett stood glowering at him, a shuddering mixture of fear and fury. Kay Hallowell huddled in the corner opposite the entrance, on the floor. Bunny squatted next to her, holding limply to Kay's forearm, looking out into the room with vacant eyes.

"Horty," said the Maneater insistently. Horty met his gaze again. Effortlessly he blocked the hypnotic force which the Maneater was exerting. The mellow voice went on, soothingly. "You're home at last, Horty—really home. I am here to help you. You belong here. I understand you. I know the things you want. I will make you happy. I will teach you greatness. Horty. I will protect you, Horty. And you will help me." He smiled. "Won't you, Horty?"

"You can drop dead," said Horty succinctly.

The reaction was instant—a shaft of brutal hatred whetted to a razor-edge, a needle-point. Horty rebuffed it, and waited.

The Maneater's eyes narrowed and his eyebrows went up. "Stronger than I thought. Good. I'd rather have you strong. You are going to work with me, you know."

Horty blankly shook his head. Again, and twice more, the Maneater struck at him, timing the psychic blows irregularly. Had Horty's defense been a counter-act, like that of a rapier or a boxing-glove, the Man-

eater would have gotten through. But it was a wall.

The Maneater leaned back, consciously relaxing. His weapon apparently took quantities of energy. "Very well," he purred. "We'll dull you down a bit." He drummed his fingers idly.

Long moments passed. For the first time Horty realized that he was bound, his wrists together and pulled down between his thighs by a rope which was secured to the rung and which also snubbed his ankles to the legs of the chair. Kay stirred and was quiet. Bunny looked at her and away, still with that vacant gaping look on her sweet round face. Bluett shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

The door was elbowed aside. Solum came in with Zena in his arms. She was limp. Horty made a move; the rope checked him. The Maneater smiled engagingly and motioned with his head. "Into the corner with the rest of the trash," he said. "We might be able to use her. Think our friend would be more co-operative if we cut her down a bit?"

Solum grinned wolfishly.

"Of course," said the Maneater thoughtfully, "She isn't very big to begin with. We'd have to be careful. A little at a time." Belying his off-hand tone, his eyes watched every move of Horty's face. "Solum, old fellow, our boy Horty is a little too alert. Suppose you jolt him a bit. The edge of your hand at the side of his neck, right at the base of the skull. The way I showed you. You know."

Solum stalked over to Horty. He put one hand on Horty's shoulder, and took careful aim with the other. The hand which rested on his shoulder squeezed slightly, over and over again. Solum's eyes burned down to Horty's. Horty watched the Maneater. He knew the major blow would

come from there.

SOLUM'S other hand came down. A fraction of a second after it hit his neck, Monetre's psychic bolt smashed against Horty's barrier. Horty felt a faint surprise; Solum had pulled the punch. He looked up quickly. Solum, his back turned to the Maneater, touched his forehead, worked his lips anxiously. Horty shrugged this off. He had no time for idle wonderments... he heard Zena whimper.

"You're in my way, Solum!" Solum moved reluctantly. "You'll have another chance at him," said the Maneater. He opened the drawer in front of him and took out two objects. "Horty, d'ye know what these are?"

Horty grunted and nodded. They were Junky's eyes. The Maneater chuckled. "If I smash these, you die. You know that, don't you?"

"Wouldn't be much help to you then, would I?"

"That's right. But I just wanted to let you know I have them handy." Ceremoniously he lighted a small alcohol blow-lamp. "I don't have to destroy them. Single-crystal creatures react beautifully to fire. You should do twice as well." His voice changed abruptly. "Oh, Horty, my boy, my dear boy—don't force me to play with you like this."

"Play away," gritted Horty.

"Hit him again, Solum." Now the voice crackled.

Solum swept down on him. Horty caught a glimpse of Armand's avid face, the flick of a tongue across his wet lips. The blow was heavier this time, though still surprisingly less powerful than he expected—less powerful, for that matter, than it looked. Horty rolled his head with the impact, and slumped down with his eyes closed. The Maneater hurled

no bolts this time, apparently in an attempt to force Horty to use up counter-ammunition while saving his own.

"Too hard, you idiot!"

Kay's voice moaned out of the corner, "Oh, stop it, stop it..."

"Ah." The Maneater's chair scraped as he turned. "Miss Hallowell! How much would the young man do for you? Drag her out here, Bluett."

The Judge did. He said, with a leer, "Save some for me, Pierre."

"I'll do as I like!" snapped the Maneater.

"All right, all right," said the Judge, cowed. He went back to his corner.

Kay stood erect but trembling before the desk. "You'll have the police to answer to," she flared.

"The Judge will take care of the police. Sit down, my dear." When she did not move, he roared at her. "Sit down!" She gulped and sat in the chair at the end of the long desk. He reached out and trapped her wrist, pulled it toward him. "The Judge tells me you like having your fingers cut off."

"I don't know what you m-mean. Let me g—"

Meanwhile Solum was on his knees beside Horty, rolling his head, slapping his cheeks. Horty submitted patiently, quite conscious. Kay screamed.

"Nice noisy carnival we have here," smiled the Maneater. "That's quite useless, Miss Hallowell." He pulled a heavy pair of shears out of the drawer. She screamed again. He put them down and took up the blow-lamp, passing the flame lightly over the crystals which lay winking before him. By some fantastic stroke of luck—or perhaps some subtler thing than luck, Horty flashed a quick look through his lashes at that precise sec-

ond. As the pale flame touched the jewels, he trembled violently—

But he did it on purpose. He felt nothing.

HHE LOOKED at Zena. Her face was strained, her whole soul streaming through it, trying to tell him something...

He opened his mind to it. The Maneater saw his eyes open and hurled another of those frightful psychic impulses. Horty slammed his mind shut barely in time; part of the impulse got in and jolted him to the core.

For the first time he fully recognized his lack, his repeated failure to figure things clearly out for himself. He made a grim effort. Zena trying to tell him something. If he had just a second to receive her...but he was lost if he submitted to another such blow as the first one. There was something else, something about—*Solum!* The signalling hand on his shoulder, the hot eyes, bursting with something unsaid...

"Hit him again, *Solum.*" The Maneater picked up the shears. Kay screamed again.

Again *Solum* bent over him; again the hand pressed his shoulder secretly, urgently. Horty looked the green man full in the eyes and opened up to the message which roiled there.

ASK THE CRYSTALS. Ask the crystals how to kill one of their dream-things. Find out from the crystals.

"What are you waiting for, *Solum?*"

Kay screamed and screamed. Horty closed his eyes and his mind. Crystals...not the ones on the table. The—the—all the crystals, which lived in—in—

Solum's hard hand landed on his

neck. He let it drive him under, down and down into that lightless place full of structural, shimmering sensations. Resting in it, he drove his mind furiously about, questing. He was ignored completely, majestically. But there was no guard against him, either. What he wanted was there; he had only to understand it. He would not be helped or hindered.

He recognized now that the crystal-world was not loftier than the ordinary one. It was just—different. These self-sufficient abstracts of ego were the crystals, following their tastes, living their utterly alien existences, thinking with logic and with scales of values impossible to a human being.

He could understand some of it, untrammelled as he was with fixed ideas, though he was hammered into human mold too solidly to be able to merge himself completely with these unthinkable beings. He understood almost immediately that *Monetre's* theory of the crystal-dreams was true and not-true, like the convenient theory that an atom-nucleus had planetary particles rotating about it. The theory worked in simple practice. The manufacture of living things was a function with a purpose, but that purpose could never be explained in human terms. The one thing that was borne in on Horty was the almost total unimportance, to the crystals, of this function. They did it, but it served them about as much as a man is served by his appendix. And the fate of the creatures they created mattered as little to them as does the fate of a particular molecule of CO_2 exhaled by a man.

Nevertheless, the machinery by which the creation was done was there before Horty. Its purpose was beyond him, but he could grasp its operation. Studying it with his gulp-

ing, eidetic mind, he learned a—a thing.

It was a thing to do. It was a thing like stopping a rolling boulder by blocking it with another rolled in its path. It was a thing like lifting the brush-holder on a DC motor, like cutting the tendons at the back of the hind legs of a running horse. It was a thing done with the mind, with a tremendous effort, which said a particular *stop!* to a particular kind of life.

Understanding, he withdrew, not noticed-or ignored-by the strange egos about him. He let in the light. He emerged, and felt his first real astonishment. His neck still stung from the blow of Solum's hand, which was still rebounding. The same scream which had begun when he went under came to its gasping conclusion as he came up. Bunny still stared between the slow blink of her drugged-looking lids; Zena still crouched with the same tortured expression of concentration in her pointed face.

The Maneater hurled his bolt. Horthy turned it aside, and now he laughed.

PIERRE MONETRE rose, his face blackening with rage. Kay's wrist slipped out of his hand. Kay bounded for the door; Armand Bluett blocked her. She cowered away, across to Zena's corner, and slumped down, sobbing.

Horthy knew what to do, now; he had learned a thing. He tested it with his mind, and knew immediately that it was not a thing which could be done casually. It meant a gathering of mental powers, a shaping of the mass of them, an aiming, a triggering. He turned his mind in on itself and began to work.

"You shouldn't have laughed at

me," said the Maneater hoarsely. He raked in the two jewels and dropped them into a metal ash tray. He picked up the blow-lamp, meticulously adjusting the flame.

Horthy worked. And still, a part of his mind was not occupied with the task. You can kill crystal-creatures, it said. The Maneater, yes, but—this is a big thing you are going to do. It may kill others...what others?

Solum.

Solum, ugly, mute, imprisoned Solum, who had, at the last moment, turned against the Maneater and had helped him. He had carried Zena's message, and it was his own death warrant.

He looked up at the green man, who was backing away, his flaring eyes still anxiously filled with the message, not knowing that Horthy had read it and acted upon it seconds before. Poor, trapped, injured creature...

But it was Zena's message. Zena had always been his arbiter and guide. The fact that it was hers meant that she had considered the cost and had decided accordingly. Perhaps it was better this way. Perhaps Solum could not in some unfathomable way, enjoy a peace that life had never yielded him.

The strange force mounted within him, his polymorphic metabolism draining itself into the arsenal of his mind. He felt the strength drain out of his hands, out of the calves of his legs.

"Does this tickle?" snarled the Maneater. He swept the flame over the winking jewels. Horthy sat rigidly, waiting, knowing that now this mounting pressure was out of his control, and that it would release itself when it reached its critical pressure. He kept his gaze fixed on the purpling, furious face.

"I've always wondered," said the Maneater, "which crystal builds which part, when two of them go at it." He lowered the flame like a scalpel, stroking it back and across one of the crystals. "Does that—"

Then it came. Even Horty was unprepared for it. It burst from him, the thing he had understood from the crystals. There was no sound. There was a monstrous flare of blue light, but it was inside his head; when it had passed he was quite blind. He heard a throttled cry, the fall of a body. Slowly, then, knees, hip, head, another body. Then he gave himself up to pain, for his mind, inside, was like a field after a wind-driven brush fire, raw and burnt and smoking, speckled with hot and dying flames.

Blackness crept over it slowly, with here and there a stubborn luminous pain. His vision began to clear. He lay back, drained.

SOLUM had tumbled on the floor by his side. Kay Hallowell sat against the wall with her hands over her face. Zena leaned against her, her eyes closed. Bunny still sat on the floor, staring, weaving very slightly. Near the door, Armand Bluett was stretched out. Horty thought, the fool passes out like a corseted Victorian. He looked at the desk.

Pale and shaken, but erect, the Maneater stood. He said, "You seem to have made a mistake."

Horty simply stared at him dully. The Maneater said, "I would think that, with your talents, you would know the difference between a crystalline and a human being."

I never thought to look, he cried silently. *Will I ever learn to doubt? Zena always did my doubting for me!*

"You disappoint me. I always have

the same trouble. My average is pretty high, though. I can spot 'em about eight times out of ten. I will admit, though, that *that* was a surprise to me." He tossed a casual thumb at Armand Bluett. "Oh well. Another heart case on the Fair Grounds. A dead crystalline looks just the same as a dead human. Unless you know what to look for." With one of those alarming changes of voice, he said with hate-filled sibilance, "*You tried to kill me...*" He wandered over to Horty's chair and looked down at Solum. "I'll have to learn to get along without old Solum. Nuisance. He was very useful." He kicked the long body idly, and suddenly swung around and landed a stringing slap on Horty's mouth. "You'll do twice what he did, and like it!" he shouted. "You'll jump when I so much as whisper!" He rubbed his hands.

"Oh-h-h..."

It was Kay. She had moved slightly. Zena's head had thumped down into her lap. She was chafing the little wrists.

"Don't waste your time," said the Maneater, casually. "She's dead."

Horty's fingertips, especially the growing stubs on his left hand, began to tingle. *She's dead. She's dead.*

At his desk, the Maneater picked up one of the crystals and tossed it, glancing at Zena. "Lovely little thing. Treacherous snake, of course, but pretty. I'd like to know where the crystal that made her got its model. As nice a job as you'll find anywhere." He rubbed his hands together. "Not a patch on what we'll have from now on, hey, Horty?" He sat down, fondling the crystal. "Relax, boy, relax. That was one hell of a blast. I'd like to learn a trick like that. Think I could? ...Maybe I'll leave it to you, at that. Seems to be

quite a drain on you."

Horty tensed muscles without moving. Strength was seeping back into his exhausted frame. Not that it would do him much good. The rope would hold him if he were twice his normal strength.

She's dead. She's dead. When he said that, he meant Zena. Zena had wanted to be a real live normal human being...well, all strange people do, but Zena especially, because she wasn't human, not at all. That was why she'd never let him read her mind. She didn't want anyone to know. She wanted so much to be human. But she'd known. She must have known when she sent him the message through Solum. She knew it would kill her too. She was—more of a human being than any woman born.

I can move now, he thought. *But the rope...He's got to untie me some time.*

"You'll sit there without food or water until you rot," the Maneater said pleasantly, "or at least until you weaken enough to let me into that stubborn head of yours so I can blast out any silly ideas you may have about being your own master. You belong to me—three times over." He handled the two crystals lovingly. "Stay where you are!" he snarled, whirling on Kay Hallowell, who had begun to rise. Startled and broken, she sank down again. Monetre rose, went and stood over her. "Now, what to do with you. Hm."

There was a gentle tugging at Horty's legs. He checked the impulse to move, to look. The pressure of the rope came off his right ankle. His left.

"You could be a heart failure case too," the Maneater said pensively to Kay. "A little *curare*...no. The Judge is enough for one day."

A COOL FLAT blade slid up the inside of Horty's wrist, turned, and bit into the rope. Without bending his neck, Horty could just see the grey-green hand that wielded the knife. Freedom and hate combined to accelerate the return of strength to his body. He rose, flexing his hands, trying not to breathe noisily.

"Well, we'll dispose of you in some way," said the Maneater, returning to his desk, talking over his shoulder at the frightened girl. "And soon—uh!" He found himself face to face with Horty.

The Maneater's hand crept out and closed around the jewels. "Don't come one small half-inch nearer," he rasped, "or I'll smash these. You'll slump together like a bag of rotten potatoes. Don't move, now."

"Is Zena really dead?"

"As a doornail, son. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that it was so quick, I mean. She deserved a more artistic treatment. *"Don't move!"* He held the crystals together in one hand, like walnuts about to be cracked. "Better go back and sit down where it's comfortable." Their eyes met, held. Once, twice, the Maneater sent Horty his barbed hate. Horty did not flinch. "Wonderful defense," said the Maneater admiringly. "Now go and sit down!" His fingers tightened on the crystals.

Horty said, "I know a way to kill humans too." He came forward.

The Maneater scuttled back. Horty rounded the desk and came on. "You asked for it!" panted the Maneater. He closed his bony hand. There was a faint, tinkling crackle.

"I call it Havana's way," said Horty thickly, "after a friend of mine."

The Maneater's back was against the wall, round-eyed, pasty-faced. He goggled at the single intact crystal in his hand—like walnuts, only one

broke when the two were crushed together—uttered a birdlike squeak, dropped the crystal, and ground it under his feet. Then Horthy had both hands on his head. He twisted. They fell together. Horthy wrapped his legs around the Maneater's chest, got another grip on the head, and twisted again with all his strength. There was a sound like a pound of dry spaghetti being broken in two, and the Maneater slumped.

Blackness showered in descending streamers around Horthy. He crawled off the inert figure, pushing his face almost into Bunny's. Bunny's face was looking down and past him, and was no longer vacant and staring. Her lips were curled back from her teeth. Her neck was arched, the cords showing starkly. Gentle Bunny... she was looking at the dead Maneater, and she was laughing.

Horthy lay still. Tired, tired... it was almost too much effort to breathe. He raised his chin to make it easier for air to pass his throat. This pillow was so soft, so warm... Feather-touches of hair touched his upturned face, delicately stroked his closed eyelids. Not a pillow; a round arm curved behind his head. Scented breath at his lips. She was big, now; a regular human girl, the way she always wanted to be. He kissed the lips. "Zec. Big Zec," he murmured.

"Kay. It's Kay, darling, you poor brave darling..."

He opened his eyes and looked up at her, his eyes a child's eyes for the moment, full of weariness and wonder. "Zec?"

"It's all right. Everything's all right now," she said soothingly. "I'm Kay Hallowell. Everything's all right."

"Kay." He sat up. There was Armand Bluett, dead. There was the Maneater, dead. There was—was—

He uttered a hoarse sound and scrambled uncertainly to his feet. He ran to the wall and picked Zena up and put her gently on the table. She had plenty of room... Horthy kissed her hair. He gathered her hands together and called her quietly, twice, as if she were hiding somewhere near and was teasing him.

"Horthy—"

He did not move. With his back to her, he said thickly, "Kay—where's Bunny?"

"She went to sit with Havana. Horthy—"

"Go stay with her a little. Go on. Go on..."

She hesitated, and when she left, she ran.

HORTHY HEARD a mourning sound, but he did not hear it with his ears. It was inside his head. He looked up. Solum stood there, silent, but the mourning sound appeared again in Horthy's head. Horthy did not ask Solum to go away.

After a time they talked.

"What'll we do with the Judge?"

It's dark now. I'll leave him near the midway. It will be heart failure.

"And the Maneater?"

The swamp. I'll take care of it.

"You're a big help, Solum. I feel sort of—lost. I would be, too, if it hadn't been for you, cutting those ropes."

Don't thank me. I haven't the brains for a thing like that. She did it. Zena. She told me exactly what to do. She knew what was going to happen. The Maneater always did think I was a crystalline. She knew that. She knew I was human, too. She knew everything. She did everything.

"Yeah. Yeah, Solum... What about the girl? Kay?"

Oh, I don't know.

"I think she better go back where

she was working. Eltonville. I wish she could forget the whole thing."

She can.

"She—oh, of course. I can do that. Solum, she—"

I know. She loves you, just as if you were human. She thinks you are. She doesn't understand any of this.

"Yes. I—wish... Never mind. No I don't. I was—loved by Zena."

Yes. Oh, yes...and what are you going to do?

"Me? I don't know. Cut out, I guess. Play guitar somewhere."

What would she want you to do?

"I—"

The Maneater did a lot of harm. She wanted to stop him. Well, he's stopped. But I think perhaps she would like you to right some of the wrongs he's done. All over our carnival route, Horty—anthrax in Kentucky, deadly nightshade in the pasture lands up and down Wisconsin, puff adders in Arizona, polio and Rocky Mountain spotted fever in the Alleghenies; why, he even planted tsetse flies in Florida with his infernal crystals! I know where some of them are, but you could find the rest better even than he could.

"My God...and they mutate, the diseases, the snakes..."

Well?

"Who would I be working for? Who's going to run the—Solum! Why are you staring at the Maneater like that? What's your idea? You—you think I—"

Well?

"He was three inches taller...long hands...narrow face... I don't really see why not, Solum. No one has to know... Hey! Who said you had no brains?"

I did. She told me to suggest it to you if you didn't think of it yourself.

"She— Oh Zee, Zee... Solum!

You're holding back something else. What is it?"

Just one more thing. Where did you come from?

"Two crystals made me. Then Zena, of course—she shaped me into just what she thought I should be. Why?"

You can bring crystals together. Even the Maneater did it.

"Suppose I can? What could they make for me that I'd want?"

Whatever you miss most.

"Do you think I could? Do you really think I could, Solum? —Even big? She always wanted to be big!"

You could try.

"I will, I will...everything she was, she gave to me. I'll keep it and give it back, if I can. Zee—Zena, honey. So long. We'll give you and Havana a nice sendoff tomorrow. But —I'll see you. I'll—see you..."

You'd better take care of Kay Hal-lowell now, before you change, Horty. Otherwise you'll scare her out of her wits. By the way—why didn't you die when the Maneater broke your crystals?

"That. Why, they were through with me. I don't know how long they'd been finished. Tell you what, though. When I was a kid I used to have to eat ants. Zee said my formic acid balance was out. Well, when I was about nine or ten, I quit wanting ants. It didn't occur to me to wonder why. I've never wondered why anything. But must have been when I was finished. I've been a mature, complete thing ever since I was ten years old! But I didn't know it. Zee didn't, either. She stood guard with her life over those jewels for years when she didn't even have to!"

PART OF A LETTER:

...in the hospital just resting up, Bobby Baby. I guess I just





FIDO

By Mack Reynolds

Man has his pets and becomes fond of them through long attachment. But there are others who desire the companionship—of man!

PREFACE

THROUGHOUT any given year the newspapers of any and all countries carry daily news items concerning the strange disappearances of otherwise little known citizens. In our own country it is a matter of official record that some thousands of people vanish yearly, and with few exceptions, are never heard from again.

It is as if the Earth opened and swallowed them, leaving no trace.

This story is not to be construed as a factual account of any single disappearance. It is presented as pure fantasy and must be considered as such.

And yet, who knows...

LESTER COLE found himself sprawled upon an oversized bed in a luxurious apartment which looked as though it had come straight from a Hollywood production. He shook his head fretfully; the last he could remember was walking toward the drug-store for a coke.

"Okay," he said aloud, "let's wake

up. What gives?"

It didn't come back to him. He lay there awhile, trying to force an explanation from his mind. Had he just recovered from a siege of amnesia? If so, how long had it lasted, and where was he now?

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and surveyed the room. Along one side of it was a built-in television set; along another, bookcases. There was a tremendous easy chair, and beneath his feet the heaviest rug he'd ever set foot upon. The lighting was indirect and soft; he couldn't figure out its source.

One doorway opened into a small but complete bath, another into a kitchenette. He went back to the combination living and bedroom and continued his exploration. There were at least five hundred books upon the shelves. They included everything from detective stories to classics. A built-in bar took its place between bookshelves; the list of liquors it contained ran from absinthe to vodka and back. He picked up a bottle of Metaxa and considered whether or not it would be ethical to try a drink. He put it back, figuring that he'd better not get into anything until he knew the deal.

There was one more door leading from the living room but it was locked. He frowned. There weren't any windows in the place. It suddenly hit him hard; he was a prisoner!

There were no two ways about it. Of course, the place was comfortable enough and obviously the food and liquor, the books and radio, were meant for his use. But he didn't get it. Why?

It couldn't be a kidnapping; neither he nor his people had money; nobody snatched his type. It couldn't be spies; he didn't know anything of value to a foreign country.

He went to the bar and poured himself a pony of the Metaxa. At least he

might as well enjoy the things supplied him. He took the drink with him over to what he'd thought was a television set and found it wasn't orthodox. Its four identical dials had numbers from zero to nine, all set at zero. There was a pamphlet on top of the cabinet. He found it contained a comprehensive list of musical selections everywhere from calypso, through jazz, to classical; each piece preceded by a number. Toward the end of the booklet was a lengthy list of motion picture productions, most of the better films that had been released recently as well as a goodly number of screen classics. Each had a number.

IT SUDDENLY came to him. He took, at random, number 1052, "Blue Room." Setting the four dials at that number, he pushed the switch marked *On-Off* to the *On* position and the song immediately swelled into sound. He snorted and switched the set off. Looking through the movie productions, he found "Rebecca," number 7820. He set the dials and turned the set on again. The lights of the room went low; what he'd taken for the television screen lit up, and the picture he'd seen almost fifteen years ago began showing.

He shut the set off and went back to corner another drink. That phonograph-movie projector was out of place, there wasn't any such thing on the market. And, now that he thought of it, the lights were amazingly advanced too. If he picked up a book they brightened, if he switched on the movie screen, they decreased in intensity. They automatically adjusted to whatever he was doing.

A thought abruptly impressed itself on his mind. It was as though someone was saying:

"Would you like to come in for awhile, Lester Cole? I am afraid you must be somewhat upset by this sud-

den change."

Cole looked around for the source of the words, unsuccessfully. "Mental telepathy," he growled. "This is crazy."

"I'm afraid it's the only manner in which we can communicate," the thought said. "You'll become used to it."

"I hope not," he muttered acridly. "I should stay so long."

No words came back, but he gained an impression of appreciation of his attempt at humor in the mind of the other.

His eyes went to the door which had been locked; it stood open now. He figured that if this character wanted him to come out, he might as well. Obviously, it wouldn't be hard to come in and get him. Besides, thus far he'd been offered no violence.

He walked through the door and found himself in a room approximately ten times the size of those he was used to. But it wasn't the size that shocked him; the place was *alien*. Not with the alienness of Europe, or the Orient; it was alien to *earth*. Furnishings, ornaments, everything—just didn't *belong*.

He felt cold fingers creep up his back.

The thought said, "*Don't be alarmed Lester Cole. There is no danger.*"

He tried to cover the fear welling up inside him with a bold front. "Just call me Les," he growled. "Or better still, not at all."

He caught the feeling of dry humor again. Evidently whoever this joker was, he appreciated the ridiculous.

And suddenly Les saw it.

HAVING DONE the average amount of science-fiction reading, Les Cole was accustomed to having his aliens from space pictured either as half nude Princesses from

Mars, or completely nauseating creatures with an unbelievable plurality of legs, eyes, tentacles, and various un-earthly appendages. Of course, in his mind, he had rejected the possibility that the ladies from Mars were of the type that won contests at Atlantic City. He actually expected alien life, if any, to be revolting in appearance.

This wasn't. The entity wasn't by any means human and it wasn't of earth, but, on the other hand, it was far from repulsive. For some reason, Les had brought to mind the face of Abe Lincoln, ugly and beautiful in its deep sadness.

The being rested upon a huge couch. Roughly, Les estimated it to be about fifteen feet in height and possibly four hundred pounds in weight.

There was a comfortable, human-type chair a few feet from the couch. "*Please sit down, Les,*" the thought said.

Les walked over with an air of confidence and made himself comfortable. He wondered who he was kidding; this thing could read his mind and obviously knew he was fighting off panic. He said, "I suppose the script calls for me to yell, 'Where am I, and what the hell am I doing here?'"

The sensing of humor again. "*You have an agile mind, Les. I appreciate it. I am afraid I can't tell you where you are since your knowledge of the . . . er, universe, precludes an understanding. And I would rather wait a time before telling you why you are here.*"

He was beginning to conquer his fear. Talking helped. "By the looks of that apartment, it's not difficult to guess that you've seized humans before. I'd make a rough guess and say you're studying us with the ultimate idea of landing on earth and taking over." He might as well get in a few licks of propaganda while he was at

it. "Brother, you've got a job ahead of you."

"Your guess would be wrong. However, you will find yourself made as comfortable as is within my ability. Are the apartment, food, books, bed, and so forth, as you would wish?"

Les was irritated. Evidently he wasn't going to be told why he'd been seized. "I haven't checked the books and food, but I notice that the best of the brandy is only a hundred years old," he said bitterly.

He was surprised to feel, in the next thought, a sensation of distress. *"I am extremely upset, Les. I thought I had made every effort to have you as comfortable as possible. Was there anything else you wanted?"*

He was going to say Lana Turner, but suddenly felt a twinge of conscience. He didn't know what he was doing here, or what the ultimate disposal of him was to be, but, after all, this creature had done what it could to make him comfortable. At least he wasn't in some kind of dungeon.

"As a matter of fact, it's very nice," he said grudgingly.

The thing was obviously relieved. *"Thank you. I have been upset at the possibility that you were without the things to which you're used. But now I believe you have arrived at the point where it is necessary you indulge in your human habit of sleeping. Why don't you retire?"*

WHEN LES COLE awoke, he expected to find himself at home in bed, remembering a dream that wasn't really a nightmare, although it should have been. In fact, he told himself, the place had been at Shangri La and he'd be willing to take some of that kind of imprisonment anytime.

He gave a short laugh and opened his eyes. He took in the indirect lighting, now softly increasing in intensity

since he was awake; the extensive bookcases; the phonograph-movie set, or whatever it was; the tremendous easy chair; the built-in bar.

"Here we go again," he groaned. It made a better dream than it did reality; a dream doesn't need any reason, this whole situation certainly didn't have any.

He dressed and made his way to the kitchenette conscious of hunger. There was a tremendous refrigerator here. He opened it experimentally. It was packed with food ranging from luscious fruit to cold fried chicken. Bottled goods started with milk and soft drinks and wound up with beer and champagne. He peered into the cupboards and found further supplies in profusion, including half a dozen large cans of caviar. He'd never tasted caviar.

The deep freeze was filled with packaged meals. He picked up several. One label read: *"Oeufs aux tomates St. Antonine*, insert in Unit Four, five minutes." He looked at the small stove and located the door marked Unit Four.

"Stop me if I'm wrong," he told himself, "but I seem to recall that *oeufs* are eggs. The rest I'll take a chance on." He popped the package into the Unit Four compartment and began figuring out how to achieve coffee, toast and butter. He didn't have much trouble.

After eating, he returned to his living room and immediately spotted two bottles that hadn't been there the night before, setting on the bar. The labels were weathered and indecipherable, but he didn't have to be told what they were.

He stared at them. "I'll bet the stuff was laid down by Julius Ceasar," he muttered inwardly.

The thought said, *"If you are awake now, Les, perhaps you would like to stroll in the gardens. You haven't been*

out in the fresh air for some time."

The door leading to the larger room was still open. "All right," he said, "I'm coming." Evidently, the thing's plans included keeping him in as good health as possible.

Standing, the creature seemed even larger than before. It led the way, walking slowly, to the garden. Les felt the edge of humor he'd noticed the night before in the next thought.

"You were amusing yourself at my expense when you requested the brandy, Les. It isn't usually as old as you gave me to believe. But it was amusing to meet your challenge. You will be pleased to learn they are the two oldest bottles on earth."

He refused to let his mind consider some of the implications in the other's words; it was too much.

They had reached the garden now, and his worst fears, the suspicions he'd been trying to keep submerged, were realized. This was utterly foreign, not of earth; and he suspected it wasn't even of the solar system and possibly not of the universe he knew. It was beautiful, unbelievably, indescribably, beautiful; but terribly alien, from the blue-gold sun above to the technicolor sand at his feet.

But the shock was quick to leave him; he'd had too many new things happen these last few hours for this to floor him. He looked about with keen interest and asked questions when something he didn't understand presented itself. He always got answers, evidently nothing was taboo.

He wandered around noting everything, including the fact that his host, or jailer, as the case might be, evidently had a metabolism considerably slower than that of man. It moved ponderously and Les covered ten yards for every one of the alien's, in spite of the latter's great size. He briefly considered making his escape at this time, but

rejected the idea. As yet, he had no idea of where to flee, or what methods his captor had available to recapture him. He'd best learn more of the ropes before he stuck his neck out.

LATER, IN his room, he sat in his deep chair and tried to make some sense out of the situation. Obviously, these creatures were far in advance of earth in their science. And, seemingly, they were studying man. Why? No matter how much he mulled it over, there was only one answer. They were interested in taking over the earth. But, if that were so, why hadn't they done it already? They obviously had the power and the ability.

He got up and went over to the bar and picked up one of the brandy bottles. He wondered how the thing had ever got hold of it. For that matter, how had it got hold of him? The cork was still good; he opened the bottle and poured a sizable slug into a sniffer glass and returned to his chair. He couldn't think of anything he could do at present toward escaping. Until he acquired more information, he might as well take it easy.

He spent the rest of the day with the books, the movies, the bar and the kitchen. And the next day, and the next. Except for daily walks and talks with the alien creature, his life began to assume a pattern which didn't take it beyond the little apartment. He decided that life wasn't so bad, even in jail, if you picked the right jail; although it would help if you knew what you were in for, and for how long.

But a week later—judging passing days by the number of times he'd slept—he still wasn't adjusted to his new environment. For one thing, he was drinking too much, for another, he couldn't get the escape bug out of his head. Ordinarily, he thought, he

wouldn't mind this situation. He liked books, good music, good food and liquor, and had never been able to afford them before. He didn't even particularly mind the absence of other humans; besides, he'd been told there were others here and that he'd meet them shortly. His own company had always been his favorite anyway. But he couldn't enjoy these things, not knowing the why and wherefore of it all. Why was he here? How long would he stay?

Within himself, he felt some responsibility to the human race. He'd been kidnapped for some purpose. What was it? What happened to the human race? If it was in danger from these aliens, he certainly wasn't doing anything here to protect it.

He snorted. As though there was anything he could do. As far as his own treatment was concerned, he reminded himself of how on a farm the kids will have a pet chicken, or calf, or lamb, and treat it like a member of the family. They love it all to pieces, but just the same when slaughter time comes...

THAT NIGHT he entered the large room for his customary talk with the alien. He could feel its thoughts and recognized that it was worried about him.

"You aren't happy, Les."

"How could you expect me to be suddenly taken away from my home and relatives and be satisfied? Besides that, the mystery of all this upsets me. What am I doing here? Why are you keeping me prisoner? What plans are you making for earth?"

An impression of distress. "*You are not a prisoner, Les. You are free to do whatever you please, or go where you wish. —And your earth is in no danger.*"

"Could I go back to earth?"

"*I am sorry you want to go, Les. There is no return. Please try to adapt yourself to this new home.*"

"But why am I here? What do you want of me? I don't get it."

He could sense infinite sadness in the thought of the other. "*In all the universe, Les, there is no living thing, small or great, that is alone as is the garook—my race. Eons before we developed the scientific progress you marvel at, our fundamental instincts were formed. These instincts prevent garook from feeling affection for garook, except during a brief mating season that comes only once in five of your earth years. In our early existence, the bare sight of another of our species led us to dash madly together, rending and tearing, until one was dead. The reasons for this are too many and would be too strange for you to understand, although some of your deep sea forms of life on earth have similar instincts. At a distance, telepathically, we were able to cooperate with each other; but proximity meant bloodshed. As we developed, we were able to overcome some of this instinct, but not all. Even today, I am extremely uncomfortable in the presence of another garook, as he is in mine.*"

"*This was bearable in the early days of the race, perhaps, but as we have grown intellectually, the need has developed for that greatest of all attributes of the intelligent mind. I speak of the need of companionship, attachment, sympathy.*"

"I... I still don't get it," Les said, confused.

There was a touch of affection in the thought that came back. "*In all the universe, Les, there are few species that can feel attachment for any except its own kind. Of them all, man has the greatest capacity for love, sym-*"

pathy and understanding. Even in your most primitive form, you brought the dog into your caves and into your hearts. Man has had to be cruel as he fought his way upward, but it was not a cruelty that came from the heart, it was born of necessity. He has had to use the other animals of his planet for food and for beasts of burden, but always beneath this need was a capacity for affection that is amazing. You see, thus far man has not been able to live up to his Golden Rule which has been expressed by his wise men and his holy men in all ages, but at least he strives toward that goal. His mind is capable of conceiving it and desiring it."

Les sat quietly for a long time. "I believe I am beginning to understand," he said finally. "If you don't mind, I think I'll retire to my apartment. I've got a date with a bottle."

"One other thing, Les. I have noticed that you have been lonely and upset since you have been here. I hope you will change. I have a surprise that I believe will be pleasant."

"All right," Les said. "Good night."

The feeling of affection. "Good night, Les."

HE WALKED slowly to his apartment and opened the door.

She sat up quickly from where she had been sprawled on the bed. Her eyes were swollen with tears and she was obviously terrified.

"Who are you?" she stuttered.

Les stared at her. "How did you get here?"

She shook her head in bewilderment. "Don't you know? I was coming home from work. Suddenly..."

He nodded wearily. "...Suddenly you were here." He went over to the bar and mixed two strong ones, using the twenty-year-old Irish Whiskey. He made a mental note to ask the

garook to get him some more of it; he was running low.

He took the drinks over to the bed and handed her one. "You'd better take this," he said. "You'll probably need it."

She took it hesitantly. "I'm afraid you've put something in it...or something."

Les shook his head. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm in the same boat you are." He explained, as well as he could, where they were and what was in store for her. By the time he was finished, she was sobbing again. He sat beside her on the bed and put one arm protectively around her shoulder.

"It's not really bad at all. You're secure here. You'll have everything you want."

"But my family, my friends. What will they think, what will they do?"

He patted her rounded arm. "It will be one more mysterious disappearance. It will hurt, at first, but life goes on."

She couldn't accept it. "I don't understand. What do these awful things want? Why did they kidnap us?"

His heart went out to her. "I believe I've just about got it straight. You see, the garooks have a great capacity for love and understanding but can't find it between themselves. They are scientifically advanced beyond our conception, but they desire affection desperately. They bring men into their homes for companionship. What it amounts to is...well, they keep us as men keep dogs."

She looked at him strangely. "But if this one already had you, what did he want me for?"

He was embarrassed. "My garook...my master...was afraid I was unhappy. He had given me everything he could conceive of, books, movies, food, drink. But I was still unhap-

"A Nickel Saved..."





By Robert W. Krepps

**Some men make their fortune easily,
but with Uncle Jack it was a long process
of being thrifty—even with his own body!**

MY MOTHER used to say that you could walk from Times Square to Topeka and never find such a stolid and staid couple as my Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Jack. "They're in a solemn little rut, like two tin people on a trick Swiss barometer," she'd say. "You be polite to 'em, but never imitate 'em. You get some fun out of living." And I'd agree, and promise I'd never thrust a foot into my grave till I was ready to lie down in it.

And I often wonder what Mother would say these days if she knew what I know about Uncle Jack, and about

what Aunt Dorothy did after he was dead; but I'll never tell her, because I think it would shock the living daylights out of her.

* * *

It was a crisp, frost-on-the-window, see-your-breath morning in December; it was a couple of years ago, I was about twenty, and I was lying under four or five blankets wishing I could stay there till spring, when Aunt Dorothy whisked into my room. She was a plump stubby woman, pleasant in the face and short in the wind. She saved string, mainly because Uncle Jack was always telling

her it might come in handy some day. "Waste not, want not," was his pet admonition. He wasn't miserly, you understand, he was simply careful. He loathed extravagance and ineconomy with all his heart.

Well, in blew Aunt Dorothy without so much as a knock, which showed she was pretty shaken up over something, and sat down on the edge of my bed.

"Bill," she panted, "I'm uneasy in my mind."

I made a noise of mingled inquiry and laziness, and yearned for a hot water bottle.

"Bill," she started again, "it's your Uncle Jack."

"Jack, shimack," I said to myself rudely, wishing it were Saturday, and aloud I said, "Uhhh?"

"He won't allow me to watch him shave," said she, pathetically.

"The inhuman beast," I said to myself, and "He won't?" to her.

"No. For twenty-three years more or less I've been watching him shave. I love to watch him shave." Two large and incredible tears rolled down her pink cheeks, so that I woke up and realized that something was honestly wrong, and "It's one of the few pleasures I have always been able to count on," she said, snuffing a little.

I sat upright in the chill air, shivering, and tried to look intelligently curious.

"For weeks now he's locked the door when he shaves. He won't even talk about it. And his hair's turning white, and I know something's dreadfully, horribly wrong."

"I've noticed his hair."

"Yes, whiter every day. Why, he's not yet fifty," she said, wringing her hands. "What can it be?"

"A guilty secret," I said before I remembered it was Uncle Jack I was talking about, and added immediately aft-

erward, "no, it can't be that."

"Yes, Bill, it's a secret all right, and I've just come to the end of my rope. I want you to find out what it is. Why he won't let me watch him shave."

I bundled out of bed and hunched into my bathrobe, and we went down the hall to the closed bathroom door.

"Have you looked in the keyhole?" I whispered.

"Bill!" she said, scandalized.

"Okay, I will," I said, and I bent over and did it. For a minute I couldn't see anything plainly, and then things came into focus and there was Uncle Jack, peering into the mirror, shaving. He had on a pair of trousers and an undershirt, and he looked awfully white, but with the frosty window behind him and the fluorescent light over the mirror I couldn't be sure just what was oddly different about him. . . .

"Is he there?" hissed Aunt Dorothy.

"Shaving," said I.

SHE asked something else, but I was concentrating on Uncle Jack and didn't answer her. He was a plump, Pickwickian little gentleman, about as ordinary as a salt shaker, and when he wasn't saying Waste Not Want Not he was saying Haste Makes Waste, but now he was shaving faster than I ever did, with short lightning strokes, and the queer fact was—it hit me with a jolt and I gave him a double-take—he was shaving his forehead.

I told Aunt Dorothy in a whisper what I had seen.

"Does he often shave his forehead?"

"His forehead? Of course not. Don't be silly. Why would he shave his forehead?"

"I don't know," I said, "but he's doing it."

"We'll have this out with him now," said she, in an access of decision which was as foreign to her as Shintoism, and

she banged heavily on the panel of the door. "Jack, Jack," she shouted, "let us in. Hurry!"

Uncle Jack said, loudly and distinctly, "Damn it!" and then he shouted, "No!"

But Aunt Dorothy pounded and yelped, and pretty soon the door clicked and wheezed and opened, and the pair of us trooped in.

Uncle Jack had put on his shirt and buttoned it up to the neck, though he didn't have a tie with him, and he stood, arms akimbo, trying to stare us down and make us feel that we were intruders upon his sacred privacy. He hadn't got all the shaving cream off his face, either. There was a dollop on his right temple and smears along his throat and the side of his nose.

"Well, Dorothy," said he coldly, in much the same tone he used if she spent an unwarranted nickel on a new thimble.

"Don't bluster at me," she said, although if that was blustering I was a South Sea Islander. "I want an explanation."

"Oh? An explanation," said he, beginning to snort a bit through the nostrils.

"I'm waiting," Aunt Dorothy told him, tapping her foot on the tile.

There were one or two other pieces of clever repartee, and then Uncle Jack wilted and looked mournfully at her and "Well, Dorothy," he said, "if you must know you must know." And he unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt and spread it wide, so we could see his chest.

It was all covered with white bristly hair, thick and coarse-looking, like the nap on a rug; hair about an inch long!

Aunt Dorothy screamed. Uncle Jack frowned and looked peeved and said "Oh, hush, woman!" For myself, I simply gulped and swayed forward to get

a better look.

And then fat little Aunt Dorothy clutched his arm and brought his hand up to the light. It was covered with a whitish fuzz.

"All over," he said sorrowfully. "I'm growing it all over. Face and all. Been growing it for weeks, and I've had to shave my face and hands every morning. I think it was that blasted polar cub."

Some months before this, you see, they had gone on a junket to the zoo, and Uncle Jack in a rash moment had reached through the bars and tried to fondle a polar bear of tender years; its needle-sharp teeth had neatly removed the first joint of his little finger. We had heard of the incident half a dozen times a day until suddenly, I suppose about the time the white fur had begun to sprout, Uncle Jack had ceased to villify the cub and forbade Aunt Dorothy to speak of it again. I guess he was sensitive about it. It was so bizarre a thing to happen to someone like Uncle Jack.

"Of course it was the cub," said Aunt Dorothy, taking it all for granted. "Probably his teeth were septic. Well, Jack!"

"Well, Dorothy," said Uncle Jack, with all the melancholy of the doomed in his solemn little face. I went out and closed the door behind me.

WE KEPT Uncle Jack's shame a secret between the three of us. Every so often I'd slip into his room in the morning and he'd show me how the hair was progressing on his chest. It wasn't exactly like a polar bear's fur, for it was sleek and pure white and beautiful, but I doubt if any polar bear ever took the care of himself that Uncle Jack did. The fur grew faster and faster, and he took to shaving twice a day. Even so, he'd get a kind of five-o'clock blanching, a hoary canescence like a

rime of frost on his face and the backs of his hands.

At last he gave in to it. He stayed in bed one morning, refused to get up and go to work, and wouldn't see anyone except Aunt Dorothy and me. He said, in a peevish tone, that a man couldn't be expected to shave all over three times a day, and he *wouldn't* parade the streets like a blessed freak of a half-man-half-sheep-dog, and in short, the hell with it. So he stayed in bed, with his wife and me bringing him trays and arguing with him, and he grew fuzzier and fuzzier.

After a week he looked like a mild-mannered old monkey peering over the red blanket at us. His facial fur was softer than the coarse stuff on his body, and it parted in the middle of his forehead just above his eyes and went sweeping off over the temples to his ears. After another week he had furry muttonchop whiskers and his speech was growing rather silky from talking through the long white hair on his upper lip. In a month he had turned into a fairly good imitation of a silvery-white sloth, and all he did was complain about the lumps in the mattress and how uncomfortable it was when he slept on his side and the fur got turned against the grain and prickled.

Finally Aunt Dorothy, much against his wishes, swore our doctor to utter secrecy and brought him in to look at Uncle Jack.

He hemmed and coughed, polished his glasses, took a look at Uncle Jack's chest, fingered the truly fine white cavalry moustache which drooped over my poor relative's lip, and said he had never seen anything like it and the only thing to do was shave it off. At this Uncle Jack got into a frightful temper and sent him packing out of there, while Aunt Dorothy wept into her lace hanky and said she didn't know what

was to become of them. Uncle Jack peered under his white shag at her and said indistinctly that he had known for a long time it was a unique blight that he had, and bringing in a blasted doctor to tell him he had been bitten by a polar bear and ought to shave was simply throwing money into a sewer, and Waste Not Want Not, hang it, woman, and it was all expressly against his wishes.

He then turned over, caught a tuft of his fur in a crack of the headboard and let out a screech, and began swearing to himself in a muffled monotone.

AS THE months went by, with Aunt Dorothy and I conspiring to keep people out of Uncle Jack's room, he grew furrier and furrier; his body hair was now as long as an adult polar bear's, if not a shade longer, and sometimes he would get up and undress and brush it carefully with a pair of military brushes, for he was always a tidy man and liked to keep a good appearance even if no one but his wife and nephew ever saw him. His head looked wonderful, like some curious animal out of the frozen wastes of the northland which had been grooming itself in preparation for the mating season.

He grew quite vain when I said one day that he looked distinguished, and spent some hours staring at himself in the mirror; he then got up, dressed in his Sunday best, and proclaimed his intention of taking a stroll down into town. It took some high argument to put him into bed again, and we only accomplished it after Aunt Dorothy had insisted that he would be shot on sight as an escaped brute from the zoo.

After this episode he seemed to lose heart, and groaned a great deal, and sometimes wouldn't brush his fur for days at a time, so that it got knots and tufts and snags in it and lost some of its

hoary lustre. He ate less and less, and finally one day he told us he thought he was going to die.

Aunt Dorothy rushed out and brought back the doctor, who had been calling up every day to find out how the disease was progressing, and the doctor brushed aside the hair and took my Uncle Jack's pulse, tapped him here and there, said he was sound as a dollar and ought to shave, and reluctantly left on the crest of a tide of profanity from the afflicted one, to whose frugal soul this extra expense was nothing short of wormwood.

That night Uncle Jack said that Aunt Dorothy must always remember Waste Not Want Not, and that I was to continue to be a help to her, and he was sick of this damnable silly pelt, and he thought he would die. And he did.

Aunt Dorothy had her cry out, and then we put our heads together to decide what we could do about poor Uncle Jack's body. We didn't dare let anyone in to see him as he was, and I didn't like to shave him myself, so we talked and talked and couldn't decide anything.

Finally we went over and stared at

him as he lay there, looking like an enormous mound of glistening-white weasel skins—if I may use that simile without disrespect to the memory of Uncle Jack—and Aunt Dorothy got a strange gleam in her eye.

I asked what she'd thought of, and she said quietly, "Your uncle's favorite expression, Bill," and went out to make a telephone call.

A couple of dignified gentlemen came around to the house the next morning, and after a great deal of muddled explanation from Aunt Dorothy and myself, they were ushered into Uncle Jack's room and left there alone.

We held the funeral several days later, and Uncle Jack really looked quite natural, although worn and wasted by his long confinement to his bed.

And when Aunt Dorothy, some months later, began to move out into society again, everyone said how splendid she looked in her wonderful new furs; especially her magnificent great white neckpiece.

Waste not, want not, as Uncle Jack used to say.

THE END

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The MECHANICAL

“HEY, ‘Mocky’. C’mere—”

The thick-set figure in the nondescript clothes paused on his way to the rear and looked at the bartender. The bartender jerked his head and the man called Mocky moved to the bar.

“What d’ya want?”

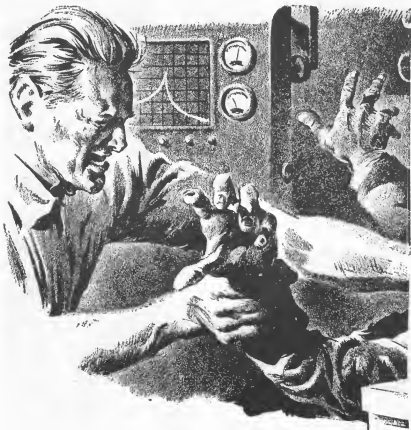
“I got a job for you.”

“Shove it! The last time you gave me a job you paid me off in money.”

“That’s bad?”

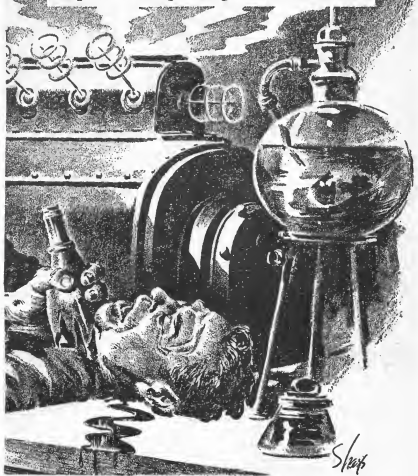
“So every guy on Madison Street hears Mocky’s got fresh and makes me ‘fore I get a block from the joint.”

The bartender laughed until he



GENIUS *By Gilbert Grant*

The theory of the machine was perfect
and so were the plans to build it. That's
why it took a special genius to thwart it.



choked on it. "Yeah. I heard about it. The mooch gets mooched. Okay! All you can drink for tonight and two fifths when you leave."

"What's the matter? You crazy or sumpin'? Or maybe you think I lost my marbles? I get stiff and blow out of here. And when I come back tomorrow you tell me you gave me the two fifths; that maybe I got rolled for 'em on the way to the flop. You oughta know better'n try that on Mocky. Write it out an' I'll stash the note."

"What makes you so hard to get along with?" the bartender was suddenly irritated. If it weren't that he needed the refrigerator... "Okay. The refrigerator's broke."

"So give me a wrench and a screwdriver and I'll fix it," Mocky said.

* * *

The elderly man with the shock of snow-white hair left his seat at the table and found another at the bar.

"A beer, please," he said to the bartender. He waited until he was served, then said, "Interesting character, that Mocky."

"A bum," the bartender said. He sucked noisily at some food caught in his molars, reached for the serving fork and used one of the tines to pry the particles loose. Wiping the fork on his stained apron, he put it back on the food counter. "A bum," he said shortly.

"So I observed. A bum of, shall we say, talents, however?"

"You're saying it. What's so smart about Mocky?"

"A screwdriver and a wrench to fix the refrigerator. That requires talent. Mechanical talent."

"Yeah. Guess it does. Hm! Never thought of Mocky that way. A genius, huh? Fill 'er up?"

The elderly man looked down at the glass, smiled and told the barten-

der to go ahead. He resumed after downing half the glass: "How is it that Mocky doesn't work for a living? Or does he?"

THE BARTENDER looked his disgust. Another character. Always characters. Always questions. A guy'd think these bums was the reason the world went around, the way people worried about 'em. "Look, mister. I ain't interested in guys like Mocky. They come in and I wait on 'em. If they got the fresh. If they ain't I t'row 'em out. See? So all right. Maybe Mocky's a little different. Maybe he works odd jobs once in a while. Like fixin' my fans when they go haywire, or the refrigerator or somethin' like that. But that's as far as it goes. Next time he comes in he gotta lay it on the counter, just like the next guy. See?"

"I see," the other said mildly. "Aah! Done already—"

Mocky was coming from behind the far end of the bar. He was shaking his head. He threw the wrench and screwdriver on the counter and growled:

"Fixed. Benny, listen. It's got a short. There ain't no place open now an'. I need some wire. It'll run till morning anyway. But don't let it go after that—"

"Three minutes," the white-haired stranger said to himself. "Unbelievable. Uh—Mocky!" the last was aloud.

The bum turned sullen eyes his way.

"I'd like to buy you a drink, Mocky," the stranger said.

"Yeah. Okay. Shot an' beer, Benny," Mocky said as he perched himself beside the white-haired man. He downed the shot in a single gulp, swallowed the beer in two gulps and wiped his mouth on a grease-stained sleeve. "So-o?"

"My name is Finster," the stranger

said. "Doctor Hugo Finster. I'd like to talk to you, privately."

Mocky turned, saw a free table along the rear wall and moved to it. The elderly man seated himself across from him, gestured for Benny to serve them drinks, waited until Mocky swallowed his and said:

"That's an odd name."

"Benny gave it to me. In his language it means curse."

"I see. Well, Mocky, I have a proposition for you. I want you to do some work for me. I'll pay you well."

"Doin' what? Rollin' pills maybe? Nah! You got me wrong, doc. I'm a mechanic."

"The best I've ever seen," Finster said. "The work is mechanical in nature."

"A real quack, eh, doc? Got one o' those electric gadgets, huh? Cures everything with it. I fixed one for a quack on Wells Street once. Tells me he's short, after I do the job. So I tell him I ain't through. I fix the gadget but good. Gees! I'll bet his next patient hit the roof when the quack puts the switch on—Nope. No dice."

"I can pay you well. Money. More than you'd know what to do with. Or . . . whiskey! Cases of it. Don't decide now. Here's my card. I'll be in all day tomorrow—"

The last Finster heard as he stepped through the door of the skid row saloon was:

"—Hey, Benny! Start payin' off—"

THE SHAPELESS cap was shoved back and a blunt finger scratched at the mop of unruly hair. A thick under lip folded over the upper as sullen dark eyes looked up at the enamelled number marker over the door. Mocky brought the card out again and read the address aloud: "1844 Mc Carn Court. Guess this is

it, all right—let's try the bell."

A tall wide-shouldered man answered the door to Mocky's ring. He studied the unshaven face, the sullen eyes, the clothes, of which no piece matched any other, with narrowed speculative glance. The voice of Doctor Finster was heard from the rear somewhere. It came closer and louder:

"Who is it, Howard? The man I was telling you about—Aah! Mocky! Come in. Come in."

"This the genius you were telling me about, doctor?" the tall man asked. He had an odd voice, colorless, unemotional and pitched on a single level. "Hm! I hope you're right."

"Never more so, Howard. Come along, Mocky. Let me show you our workshop. Tell me. What do you think of it?"

Mocky looked about with small interest. What he wanted at that moment was a drink. Maybe the doc had one. . . . He cleared his throat. "Doc. . . Uh. It was a tough night—"

"I understand," Finster said. He stepped to a cabinet close by an immense retort, opened it and brought out a bottle. He nodded for Mocky to come over and when the other did so handed him the bottle. "Go ahead, Mocky," he said. "As much as you want."

A third of the bottle was gone when Mocky returned it. He wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve, sighed and said: "Thanks! I needed it. Uh, you got a boy, doc. Where's the gadget?"

"In due time. I think I'd better explain something first. What we're doing is very important. Very. The whole world can be changed because of it, Mocky. Understand? No. That would be *too* much to expect of you. Mr. Blanchard—Howard—is putting up all the money I'll need. He's my partner. Now—I'll want you to live here. I've fixed up a room for you in

back. You can have one day off, any day you want. I'll trust you to come back the day after you've been off."

"A day off. Why? He'll never show back again," Blanchard said. It was odd to hear the vehement words, without inflection, without emotion.

"I trust him," Finster said simply. "I have faith in him."

"Faith in—that! He's a drunkard. You saw how he hit the bottle. A derelict, a weakling. How can you have faith in him?"

"This problem has taken thirty years of my life," Finster said. "How long could I have gone on without faith? It's something you can't explain. Just as I can't explain my faith in Mocky. It's just there, that's all."

"Oh. Very well. But still he should receive no day off. This work is too important. Too much hinges on it."

"When a man becomes a slave to a machine he gets to hate it. One day a week off, Howard. Understand?"

"As you wish," Blanchard looked at his watch. "I must be on my way. See you in a couple of days. 'Bye—"

"I don't like that character," Mocky said as the door closed on the other. "He's a cold fish, a wrongo."

"He is a cold fish, all right," Finster said. "But he came to me with his offer of help when I was about ready to give up. And he understands its importance."

"The guy sounds like a foreigner," Mocky went on. It was obvious he was pursuing a thought to its end. "Never heard no American talk like that."

"Hm. Perhaps. I've never given it thought, one way or another. No matter. Now, Mocky. Here's our problem—"

Most of it was in one ear and out the other. There was something about unseen waves in the air. Cosmic Waves, Finster called them; he was going to capture them in this machine

they were going to build. The machine was going to be the size of a single horse-power motor. Mocky was going to build the machine by hand with tools and parts furnished by the doctor.

"—There's a completely fitted machine shop in the basement. Come along and I'll show you the designs I made. You'll have to follow them. It will be up to you to make them work," Finster said in conclusion. "Perhaps you don't know it, Mocky. But I think you're a mechanical genius—"

"Where the hell have you been?" Benny asked as he slid a shot glass over and filled the beer for Mocky's chaser. "Hey! You been on the wagon or sumpin? You look different."

"Got a job," Mocky replied.

"That one's on me," Benny said. "You buy the next."

"I can buy this one, too."

"It's your money. Buy all you want."

THE GUY *does* look different, Benny reflected silently as he rang up the money. He was almost afraid to think the word for it—respectable—and yet there wasn't much to go on. The clothes still did not match, neither pants to jacket, and the vest was still too small. Maybe it was the clean-shaven face, maybe the light in the bum's eyes. Yeah. That was it. The guy was sure of himself, all of a sudden.

"Good job? Money in it?" Benny probed as he refilled both glasses.

Mocky cocked his head to one side and stared levelly at the other. "Benny. How come you been workin' all these years for your boss?"

"He's a right guy, that's how come. He don't hang over the bar peeping at the till to see I ring up every beer. I close when I think it's time and I

run this place the way I want. And that's the way he likes it. That's how come."

"So the money ain't got nothin' to do with it. Okay. You got your answer. Now give me another shot an beer an' I'll blow for a while. I got to get somethin'."

It was his first day off. Oddly, he didn't feel like drinking. There was a certain kind of pliers he wanted to get. He decided to pick them up at the hardware store on the corner. He walked out of the store into the lunch-hour crowd and was moved along with them. Quite suddenly he wanted to return to the old man and his machine. He edged his way out of the crowd, leaned against an El pillar and waited for a street car.

It was strange, he thought, how the little old guy could get under a guy's skin. He growled laughter in his throat. *Mocky the mooch. Mocky the mechanical genius. That was a laugh. Or was it? The old guy sure had faith. The first time anyone's ever had that in you—*

"—It will not be long, now," the words drifted past him. He looked up, startled out of his revery. Two men were walking away from him. One was tall, wide of shoulder; the other, short and fat. Mocky caught a swift glimpse of a flat-featured face, pale as suet, with heavy beetling brows.

It was Howard Blanchard.

Abruptly Mocky changed his mind about returning. Old habits returned. He sidled along, taking advantage of every window lobby, every El pillar. They were easy to follow. Straight down Van Buren to Franklin. And south on Franklin half a block.

Mocky looked up at the shabby building the two men had entered. He knew the neighborhood, the kind of business many of these buildings contained, the sort of people who were in

business. Third rate dress manufacturers, shabby millinery houses, hall lofts that were bare except for the long desks at which men sat with telephone head sets, calling numbers from lists at their finger tips, calling bookies, calling everything not legitimate.

There would be a single elevator, usually beyond the stairwell. He made his mind up instantly. They couldn't be much ahead of him. They were just entering the elevator. He flew up the stairs, three at a time and peered around the corner on the second floor. Light showed for an instant and went past. Again the stairs. This time the door opened.

He watched them until they stepped into a door near the far end of the corridor. He knelt and listened intently. Now and then he caught a hoarse, guttural phrase and a reply in monotone. It was Blanchard's voice. But he couldn't hear a single word Blanchard spoke. Only some of the words the fat man used:

"—Goot! Maybe another week, hah—? —We must be patient—So. One is old, the other weak—"

Mocky rose quickly at the sound of the elevator's return. Three men got off and one held the door open for Mocky. He stepped into the elevator and pressed the first floor button....

"DOC! I'M not giving you bull. This guy Blanchard's a wrong guy. I followed them—"

The old man kept shaking his head. Anger made his voice go up: "Don't you see how wrong you are, Mocky?" he asked. "You didn't like Blanchard from the first. So you see him walking with a man who sounds suspicious to you. I can't believe it!"

What Mocky couldn't understand was that he was rocking the boat of faith for the other. He was blind to

everything but Finster's danger. "Yeah," he grunted sourly. "Him against me. No wonder I don't show. A drunk from skid row. Okay, doc. Even an alley mechanic can finish the job now. You paid me in money so I'll be okay. One thing. Blanchard's a wrongie. Just keep that in mind—"

"Mocky. Wait!" Finster put his hand on the other's arm as Mocky turned toward the door. "I need you. Don't you understand? You proved something—"

Mocky pulled free and walked out. His eyes were bitter and hurt lay deep in them. He did not look back. . . .

"How long's this going to go on?" Benny asked. "Two nights and this is the third day."

"Wha's the matter? Ain't I been payin' for the drinks?" Mocky asked. He needed a shave and grease and the dregs of wine and whiskey stained his clothes. He had an elbow propped on the bar and he rested his cheek in a palm. Now and then the hand would slip off and he would barely catch himself from slamming against the walnut. "So don't bother me!"

"S all right with me," Benny said. He turned suddenly at the sound of angry voices from the other end of the bar. He was over the bar in a vaulting leap and running toward the two men who had suddenly begun to swing at one another. One of them had slammed a beer stein against the edge of the bar and was using it as a pronged blade.

He turned on Benny and swung with the broken edge of glass. But Benny ducked the blow with an agility that belied his paunch and weight and drove a powerhouse right to the man's belly. Another to the back of the head and the man fell flat on his face. Benny dragged him to the door and threw him out into the gutter.

"Drunks, fights, jerks!" Benny was

muttering as he returned to Mocky.

"Benny," Mocky said in an oddly quiet voice, "why do you take chances like that? He might have cut you bad. There's a cop walking alla time outside."

"Boss says no fights. That makes it no fights. See?"

"You'd go that far for the boss?" Mocky asked in the same quiet tones. He was suddenly no longer drunk.

"A right guy. That's the boss. I go all the way for a right guy. See?"

"Yeah! I see. Mocky, the wise guy. And the old man said he needed me. Benny. You don't know it but you just steered me level. Thanks."

"Bums. Always bums" Benny mumbled as he watched Mocky step through the door. "Characters. That's what come in here—"

THERE WERE no words of greeting. Just the old man's fingers pressing Mocky's. And the brightness of the old man's eyes. It was enough. They understood each other.

"Hey!" Mocky said in surprise. "How come you didn't get someone to finish it?"

"I knew you'd return."

"Ohh. Okay. Back to work. Uh I think we'll hook in the whatchamacallit. I think I got it licked 'fore I left."

"The screenerator?"

"Yeah! Now here's what you do, doc—"

The two looked at each other and smiled widely. A low hum filled the room. It was the hum of power greater than any man had ever known.

"A motor that size," Finster couldn't keep the awe from his voice, "could run the Queen Mary."

"Is that good?" Mocky asked.

"There is nothing better. I'm going to call Howard. He'll want to see it."

The smile went away from Mocky's lips. A guarded look appeared in his

eyes. "Better wait, doc," he said. "Let me work out the rough spots tonight. There's still some an' you don't want it to go bad when Blanchard is here. Tomorrow night'll be good enough too."

"I suppose you're right. You're staying the night, then?"

"Yeah. Might take all night. Go on to bed, doc. I won't need you."

The door had barely closed and Mocky was at work. Swiftly, with marvelously sensitive fingers, Mocky toiled for an hour. When he was through he flicked the switch. The motor came on with smooth humming sound. Mocky smiled and put everything away—

Howard Blanchard was paler than ever. Oddly nervous, too. His tongue kept licking his lips, and he kept wiping his hands along the sides of his trousers.

"Finished, eh?" he said in an almost inaudible voice. "And it works, eh?" There was an odd spark of something far back in the flat expressionless eyes.

"As I planned it to," Doctor Hugo Finster was proud. He patted the black metal of the motor as though he were petting flesh. He turned to Mocky, seated in a corner, a glass of beer in one hand, and continued: "There is the one to thank and congratulate. The derelict, as you once called him. He is the one who should wear the laurels. Were it not for him—"

"Yes. Yes," Blanchard broke in. "You have told me. More than once, doctor. If you will excuse me. There is a friend who is stopping off here to pick me up—"

There were three of them. Ugly, snub-nosed pistols were in each palm. The guns were leveled at the two others in the room.

"Howard! What does this mean?" Finster demanded. His voice was hard, without fear.

MOCKY'S EYES were bright and watchful. He sipped at the beer slowly and looked from one to another of the three. He recognized one, the fat, chunky man who had gone into the Franklin Street building with Blanchard. The third one also became clear. He was the man who had held the elevator door open for him. The third one recognized Mocky.

"I know that one," he said. "He was waiting for the elevator one day when Boris and Peter and I stepped out of it."

"So-o," Blanchard said, advancing on Mocky. "A genius, and a snooper too. Here. For your trouble, my curious friend..."

Mocky tumbled from the box he was on. Blood streamed from a long cut on his cheek. Blanchard looked down at him and smiled shallowly. He lifted his foot to kick Mocky and the fat man said:

"No! He is the mechanic. We may need him. Tomas. Throw some water in his face."

The lights wouldn't hold still. And the room was full of people, the same ones, in triplicate. Then Mocky's brain cleared and he found things in focus again. He felt the wetness dribbling down his cheek and it smarted.

"Lay the rod down, you jerk—" he growled.

"Be quiet," the fat man said sharply. "You," he jerked the gun toward Mocky. "Start the motor."

"No!" Finster threw the word from him. "Don't do it!"

"Don't worry, doc," Mocky said quietly. "They ain't big enough to make me."

"Do not fool yourself, my friend," the fat one said. He seemed to be the

leader. "We have the time and the size. We tried the switch. While you were on the floor. Nothing happened. Georgi says it worked a while ago. What did you do?"

Mocky shrugged his shoulders in a faint lift. His lips held a crooked smile. "Nothin'. It worked then. Should work now."

Hoarse laughter bubbled from the fat man's throat. Mocky felt a chill take hold of him at the sound.

"American fools. Brave men, smart men, and always foolish men. You think we will stop at anything to get this? This little motor will rule the world. We will build hundreds of them. Georgi. Get those pliers and bring them to me—I promise you," the fat man said moving the pliers back and forth before Mocky's eyes, "that if you don't produce the missing part I will pull the old man's tongue out by the roots."

"Listen to me," Finster broke in. He was calm, unhurried, resigned. "It doesn't matter what they do to me, Mocky. I'm done. The motor's the important thing. To you, and our country—O-ob," he sighed and slumped forward as one of them hit him with the barrel of the gun.

"Wait!" Mocky said sharply. "One thing. Promise to let the old man go. And I'll fix the motor."

"My word," the fat man said.

"Okay." Mocky walked to the motor, turned his back to them, fiddled with it for a second and snapped the switch on. The motor's hum filled the room with sound.

"It works! It works," the fat man crowed triumphantly. "Georgi! They will reward you greatly for this. Now. Get rid of these two fools. But without noise—"

Mocky didn't wait for them to start. The beer glass lay at his feet where it had fallen when Blanchard slugged

him with the gun. Swooping it from the floor in a swift move he smashed it against the edge of the table and leaped forward toward the man who was bent above the unconscious figure of the old man.

The man screamed wildly as the ragged edge of glass tore into his throat. Then there was only the choking sound of his gasping breath as his blood poured from the gaping serrated wound.

Something exploded alongside of Mocky's head. He went to his knees. A pair of legs were before him. Blindly, wildly, he grabbed them and twisted. Someone plunged headlong and Mocky wrapped his arms about the man. It was Blanchard.

Mocky butted with his head and felt it strike the other's chin and felt a thrill at the sound of the broken gasp. He shoved hard again and felt the blow strike.

Damn, he thought dumbly. If I could only get up. Then I could take care of this jerk behind me.

Something was beating a tattoo on the back of his head. There was a loud, drumming noise, voices, and suddenly everything faded behind an ebony curtain—

"SO YOU GOT here?" Mocky asked weakly. "Just in time. How's the doc?"

"He'll be all right," the F. B. I. man said. Mocky noted how alike they seemed, these quiet men who had come just in time. There were a half dozen of them. Conservative in dress, quiet in manner, efficient in their work. "Just a glancing blow. Aah! Easy, sir. That's better."

"Wha-what happened?" the old man asked. He leaned weakly against the Federal agent.

"Your friend notified the office a couple of days ago that he suspected

spies at work. He told us of your work and we thought it important enough to look into. He was right. He called us late last night to tell us that one of the men would be here tonight. We saw them enter, made sure all exits were guarded and moved in."

"I—I almost lost it at the last moment, didn't I, my friend? I could hear the motor start. My world was falling apart. First Blanchard, then you. I suppose I should have known better. You couldn't have failed me, Mocky."

"Aah, doc! You shoulda known better. I was stringin' them along figgerin' the Feds'd come in any second. But when they started on you. Well—"

"Yet I heard the motor start," the old man said. Abruptly he passed a hand across his brow. The man holding him looked closely at him. A weak smile appeared on Finster's lips. "I'm all right. Too much excitement; I guess. I've got to know what happened before you take me to a physician. You started the motor, Mocky—"

"Sure. Hell! They could have taken it for all the difference it made. Or

bought one at Sears. Done the same thing. Don't forget, doc. You said I was a mechanical genius. Had to prove it. Took the motor apart last night and put it together again. Only there were some important parts missing. Easy, eh?"

The old man shook his head weakly. The man holding him said, "I guess we'd better get along, sir."

"Mocky—" the old man turned his head.

"Don't worry, doc. I'll be around. This is one curse you won't be rid of fast. But right now I'd like a drink."

"I guess it's all right," the head of the squad said. "That cut isn't bad. A couple of bumps. Go on. Don't forget. We'll want you for evidence against these lads."

"I'll be back," Mocky said again. There was something almost jaunty in his steps.

The sullen eyes were bright suddenly and a wide smile lay on his lips as Mocky strode along. He was thinking: It was going to be the *first time* that any bum bought Benny a drink—

THE END

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The BOTTLE

By GUY ARCHETTE

THE BOTTLE was squat and green and had once been stoppered with wax. It rested on the bureau top, and Colvin's fingers touched it in a kind of mute appeal as he stood before the mirror, hesitating.

He felt the now familiar dread again, stealing through him like tendrils of icy mist. Suppose, he thought, suppose he were to gaze at his reflection and find that his existence of the past several weeks had somehow been only a dream, only a remarkably vivid and life-like illusion.

Suppose he were to find that his renewed youth had gone...

He thought of Doris, and desperation swept him. It couldn't end, he told himself. It couldn't end now, when Doris had come to mean so much to him.

A defiance born of his panic impelled his eyes upward. He looked at himself in the mirror.

The face that stared back at him was smooth and unlined, a lean face, engaging if not actually handsome, the face of a young man. The dark hair visible at temples and forehead was thick and unmarred by any trace of gray.

Relief flooded Colvin. But in the next instant he realized that nothing had actually been settled. Each day it would be like this. Each day he would approach a mirror in dread of what he might find.

One day, he felt certain, he would look at his reflection and find that

the dream was over, the song ended. His features would be lined and worn, his hair thinning and touched with gray. As it had been in the beginning...

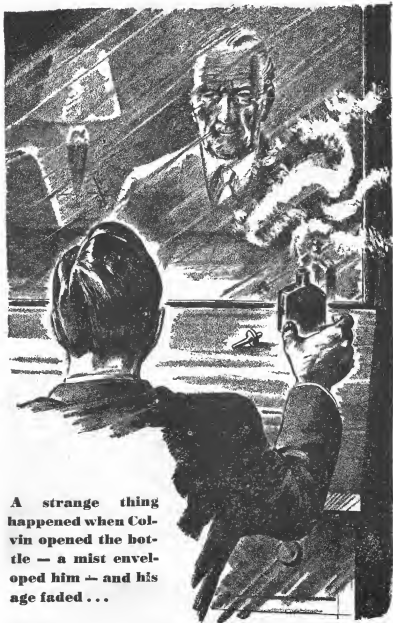
It would be like a nightmare—a conscious nightmare. He would be awake, in full possession of his senses, yet facing a reality more horrible than anything imagination might conjure.

Slowly he turned away from the bureau, his shoulders slumped. With a threat of that kind banging over him, he had been a fool to speak to Doris of marriage. A fool—yet not for worlds would he have missed her delight or the sweet shyness of her consent.

Marriage to Doris, he decided now, was out of the question. His life with her could never be anything more than a mockery and a sham—doomed eventually to be exposed. He would not be playing fair with her. The shock of his transformation, when it came, might be more than her sanity could bear.

It would be best never to see Doris again, to go someplace where her nearness would not otherwise tempt him into abandoning his resolve. He realized that this was the most considerate thing to do—but every fibre of his being seemed to writhe in rebellion at the thought. Not to see Doris again would be like giving up sunlight and music, like shutting himself away from everything worthy and fine.

He kneaded his hands in misery



A strange thing happened when Colvin opened the bottle — a mist enveloped him — and his age faded . . .

as he became aware of the full implications of his dilemma. He felt crushed between two equally impossible alternatives. There had to be some answer to his problem, he told himself. It could not be completely hopeless.

And then the answer came to him. He knew it had been in the back of his mind all along.

He would have to tell Doris, of course, tell her what had happened to him, and how it had happened. The decision of whether they would or would not continue their relationship would be hers to make.

But how could he possibly tell her of the utterly incredible? How could he tell her of something that went hand in hand with black magic and supernatural?

COLVIN glanced back at the squat, green bottle on the bureau top, and he knew how his story would begin. It would begin with that fateful evening, almost two months before when he had been crossing the boulevard and had met the gnome-like man.

He had just left the offices of the construction firm where he was employed as an architect, having been working late over some plans. Anxiety filled him, an urgent need for haste. He would have to hurry if he wanted to catch a glimpse of the girl with the soft brown hair and the large dark eyes.

He did not know her name. He knew nothing about her. He knew only that she appeared almost every evening at the modest little restaurant where he ate before taking a bus to his two-room apartment on the north side of the city.

She evidently had been coming there for some time before he grew conscious of her. But once he did, it was not long until he found himself hopelessly in love. It was ironic

and not a little fantastic, considering that he was so much older.

She could not be called a beautiful girl, though she seemed so to him. She appeared too grave, too reserved, for that. She was slim and dark, and she was always well and quietly dressed. She wore no makeup and little or no jewelry. She did not smoke. These qualities, as much as her air of intelligence and maturity, appealed to him with an intensity he had never before experienced.

He had never spoken to the girl. He had never done more than steal surreptitious glances at her from where he sat in pretended concentration behind his evening newspaper.

He could not be sure if she were aware of him, if she had ever so much as glanced in his direction. And it annoyed and hurt him. He wanted desperately to walk over to her table and make an effort to get acquainted. But he knew he couldn't do that. She might think him nothing more than an elderly flirt. She might see no further than his lined, graying exterior, though he prided himself that his body was still straight and firm despite all the years he had spent bending over a drawing board.

His familiarity with the girl was entirely one-sided. It was a thing of stolen glances and secret admiration. He lived only for those exhilarating moments when she was present in the restaurant with him—present, yet as aloof and unapproachable as the mountains of Tibet.

He was thinking of her that particular evening, as he hurried across the boulevard. He stopped in the center of the broad traffic lane, waiting for a break in the almost solid stream of cars that roared past. Dimly he was aware of another man a few feet ahead of him, and a short distance to his right, an excavation or something of the sort, which had

been railed in with boards and hung with red warning lanterns.

Neither seemed to have any particular importance, but in the next few seconds he noticed that the other man was in motion, walking erratically, with his hands outstretched before him as though ill or drunk. He was stumbling directly toward the excavation and the flimsy wooden railing around it.

The scene abruptly took on a strangeness, an almost garish clarity. The headlights of the passing cars swelled and ebbed in a pulse-beat of blinding brilliance along the dark artery of the boulevard, silhouetting the other man as he groped his way to certain injury. Colvin started forward, a cry of alarm surging to his lips.

"Good Lord—look out there!"

And then he had caught the other by the arm and was pulling him back. He had been none too soon. Anger swept him, a sudden flash of emotion that merely underscored his sense of relief. He said sharply:

"Why don't you watch where you're going? You almost—"

HE BROKE off as the other's face turned and lifted to him. The face somehow of a beardless gnome, not old and yet not young. A face in which age and youth were somehow weirdly mingled. In some unfathomable fashion it shocked Colvin. Owl-like eyes rose to blink dazedly up at him. He himself was not a tall man, yet he seemed so in comparison. The other was short and frail, with a head that seemed abnormally large.

The gnome-like man's tiny mouth shaped itself and moved in speech. Colvin could not distinguish the tone of his voice over the roar of passing cars, but somehow he understood clearly what was said.

"I...I am sorry. The lights. they

confused me. I am not accustomed to much light."

Colvin felt a cold finger of unease touch him. The other wasn't sick or drunk. He was just...strange, in a way that could not be explained.

"All right," Colvin said gruffly. "Just stand still. I'll take you across to the sidewalk."

The cars presently thinned out and were gone as the stream was dammed by a changing traffic light down the boulevard. Colvin escorted his charge to the sidewalk, hesitating a moment before he turned away.

"This is where you wanted to go, isn't it?"

"Yes....I believe so." The gnome-like man was glancing with an uncertain air along the street.

"Are you lost?" Colvin asked.

The owl-like eyes lifted to him slowly and, it seemed, sadly. "I have been lost for many orbitals. I arrathened in the wrong time direction, you see...."

"Oh," Colvin said. He felt the unease again, more sharply than before, and he stirred to complete his motion of leaving.

A small hand gripped his arm.

"I am in your debt, it seems," the gnome-like man said. "Is there any favor I can return?"

"Why...no." There was a fluttering in Colvin's chest, almost of panic. In the temporary quiet that had fallen over the boulevard, still another aspect of the other's queerness had dawned on him. He realized that the gnome-like man had not actually been using his voice, even though his lips had moved. Yet in some incomprehensible way Colvin had a distinct impression of audible speech.

He stared at the stranger in growing alarm. The owl-like eyes were studying him with a fixed intentness. They seemed to widen and glow. They seemed to draw him into them,

as though into the depths of a luminescent sea. He had the eerie sensation of being searched...read.

Then he became aware that the gnome-like man was speaking again in his toneless soundless way.

"You are not happy, Peter Colvin. It is because you too, in your own fashion, are lost in time. But I can help you. I have knowledge and abilities of a certain order...anachronistic, you might say, though you would term them supernatural

"The solution to your problem is obvious...and simple enough. To obtain the fulfillment of your dreams, it is necessary for you to regain a portion of your lost youth. I can make it possible for you to accomplish that."

Colvin floated in the luminescent depths. He felt lulled, somehow suspended. Dimly he was aware of the dark canyon of the boulevard, with cars roaring by again in a parade of flashing headlights.

THE SCENE abruptly sharpened swooped into focus. For an instant his senses possessed an abnormal clarity. He had the distinct impression that he was alone, that the gnome-like man had somehow gone. It was as though the other had *turned* in some inexplicable way that had taken him from sight. But that must have been an illusion, for in another moment he saw the stranger standing before him with an object held in one extended hand.

"Please accept this as a token of my gratitude, Peter Colvin."

Taking the object, Colvin peered at it in dazed wonder. It was a bottle he saw squat and green and stoppered with a substance that seemed to be wax.

"The bottle contains a liquid compound," the gnome-like man went on. "You might call it an elixir, for it

will react upon the mechanism of your body in such a way as to produce a period of renewed youth. The effects are not permanent, yet they will endure long enough for you to attain certain of your immediate desires.

"Do not hesitate to use it. The elixir creates no adverse physical results, as numerous others who have benefited from it would gladly testify.... And now farewell. Peter Colvin. May the future bring you much happiness."

With a grave nod, the gnome-like man turned and set off down the boulevard. Colvin stared after the strange small figure until it finally turned a corner and was gone from sight.

Slowly, then, his eyes went back to the bottle in his hand. An elixir, something that would temporarily restore youth. It was incredible, he decided, impossible, even in this day of scientific miracles. The gnome-like stranger was obviously a psychopathic case, despite his uncanny abilities. And yet... *youth!* The thought brought a tightening to his throat. Youth! To be as young as the girl with the brown hair and the dark eyes! To be able to meet her speak to her!

Recollection of the girl made Colvin suddenly tense. He realized that much precious time had passed during his encounter with the gnome-like man. He had already been late for his one-sided rendezvous at the restaurant. Now the girl would be gone.

But perhaps she had remained a little longer than usual. Acting on this hope, he thrust the bottle into a pocket of his coat and hurried into motion.

She was not there. Feeling suddenly lost and forlorn, he sat down at a table and gave his order. He was not quite sure of what it was, nor

was he quite sure of what he subsequently ate. Thoughts of the girl and of the green bottle made a confused pattern of eagerness and doubt in his mind. Later, still in a mental chaos, he took a bus to his apartment.

He placed the squat, green bottle on the bureau top, and he kept glancing at it in aching indecision as he undressed and climbed into pajamas. It seemed to draw him with a dark fascination. He returned to it and held it up against the light.

He raked his lower lip through his teeth, frowning. Was it really an elixir of youth? Would it really make him young again, even if temporarily? The gnome-like man had insisted it would. But of course there was no such thing as an elixir of youth. It was an impossibility.

And yet if it weren't—

Youth... He had never actually known the full meaning of the word. Youth to him had been a crippled father dragging his way painfully over the floor. Youth had been a blurred, vaguely unpleasant treadmill existence of work by day and school by night. Youth had been parties and picnics he had never attended. Later, of course, had come success in his chosen profession. But with it had come the realization that life had passed him by. He had few friends, few pleasant memories to look back upon. He was too shy, too indrawn to cultivate people.

HE THOUGHT of this, and he thought again of the girl with the brown hair and the dark eyes. He remembered the way she walked, the way she held her head. He remembered each change of expression on her face. She had the dignity of a queen, and yet she was very feminine and sweet. And suddenly he wanted intensely to be young again. He wanted intensely to believe that the green

bottle actually contained an elixir of youth.

A wave of recklessness abruptly swept over him. There was only one way to find out. To be sure.

Hands trembling, he tore at the wax stopper with his nails. He tilted the bottle up. He drank.

The elixir had a somewhat exotic spicy tang.

Afterward he stood very still, realizing what he had done. The walls of the room seemed to recede past him, into a vast distance. Silence closed around him, deep and cold.

Finally he went to bed.

In the morning Colvin rose at the same time as always, pulling up the window and beginning his setting up exercises. The events of the preceding night came back to him little by little, like fragments of some fantastic dream. But habit was strong. Busy with his morning routine, he did not try consciously to recall what had happened.

It was not until he had started shaving that full memory came. He looked into the bathroom mirror. The face that stared back at him was not the face he had grown accustomed to seeing in late years. It was a much younger face. Firm and smooth. The lines that had been deepening in it were gone. And when he looked for the gray in his dark hair he found that it had gone, too.

The full significance of the thing struck him, then. The impact was almost electrical.

He was young again! As young as the girl with the dark eyes.

The elixir had worked. It had opened the door to a new world.

For a time Colvin wandered dazedly about the apartment. The thing that had happened to him was so tremendous he could not get accustomed to it all at once. He wanted to shout. He wanted to cry. Several times he

rushed to a mirror to assure himself it was not just a dream.

A chance look at the clock brought him up short. It had grown late. He would be late to work.

Abruptly he shrugged. Work? No, he couldn't go to work. With his appearance so completely altered, he would be nothing more than a stranger to the people at the construction firm. He would have to write a letter of resignation. Then, later, he could find another job.

Additional problems had to be settled. Among the most immediate were those of moving to another apartment and of changing his account to a different bank. Letters would accomplish most of what had to be done. Where letters would not suffice, he could use simple subterfuges of one kind or another.

He spent the remainder of the morning writing and packing. Then he dressed and left the building, taking care that he was not seen. He had used a sudden illness as the explanation for his abrupt departure, and he did not want the sight of a mysterious young man to cast suspicion upon the maneuver.

Out on the street, with sunlight falling warmly on his face, he had an exhilarating sense of freedom, as though he had been released from a long imprisonment. He would have liked nothing better than simply to keep walking while he reveled in the delightful knowledge of his rejuvenation. But the practical side of his nature asserted itself. Certain aspects of his new existence had still to be attended to.

Over a long-delayed breakfast he studied the advertising section of a newspaper. Small furnished apartments for rent were not numerous, but the luck that seemed to date from his meeting with that gnome-like man held good. He located a suitable

apartment on his third try, and then arranged to have his belongings moved in.

Other details occupied him for the rest of the afternoon. He was careful to watch the time. The approach of evening found him ready for his daily and hitherto one-sided rendezvous with the dark-eyed girl. He had promised himself it would be different now.

HE WAS surprised to find the restaurant crowded when he walked in. All the tables seemed to be taken. And as he glanced about, he saw the girl. She was one of the few persons present who were sitting alone.

He knew what he had to do, then. He did it without a moment's hesitation.

He walked over to her table.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked.

"Why...no." She looked rather startled and hesitant, and somehow she seemed even lovelier than before.

Colvin smiled his thanks, hung up his hat and coat, and sat down. The girl had lowered her eyes back to her food. It was apparent that she was aware of him and had thrown up a barrier of reserve. He did not want to rush matters, to make her retreat still further. He kept his eyes from her, glancing with a quiet, impersonal interest about the room.

He was handed a menu by a waitress who had taken his orders many times before. She glanced at him in a vaguely puzzled way, but without recognition. Colvin, however, breathed more easily when she was gone.

He found that the girl was watching him. In a tone of casual interest, he asked:

"Is the place always as crowded as this?"

She shook her head, and her lips seemed to curve in a slight, shy smile. "They're attending a convention at a hotel down the street."

"You too?"

"No. I work near here."

He liked the way she spoke. Her voice was low and soft. A frank straightforward voice, neither coy nor cold.

He made a few other remarks from time to time, always careful to keep up his pretense of merely casual interest. He did not trust himself to do more than that. He did not want the girl to suspect that he was deliberately arranging this. He did not want her to sense his eagerness. She was friendly enough, but uncertain of him and wary.

Finally she rose to leave. She glanced at him for an instant as she reached for her purse and gloves. With an effort Colvin masked his disappointment at her going. He smiled briefly up at her and half rose from his chair. He hoped she would understand it as an acknowledgement of their exchange of a few friendly words.

She did. Her answering smile came quickly. It was as though she'd had it ready all along. Then her dark eyes fell, and she strode away.

It began like that. The conventioners were still present at the restaurant on the two following nights, and he used that as an excuse to continue sitting at her table. Each time they spoke more easily and at greater length.

Colvin learned that her name was Doris Hendricks. She worked for a large advertising firm. And like himself, she lived alone, having come to the city from a distant suburb sev-

eral months before. He was delighted by other points of similarity between them. They liked the same books, had the same interests, and they even shared indetical political beliefs.

On the fourth night, as she prepared to leave, Colvin spoke quickly to detain her. It was a crucial moment for him, and he found it impossible to maintain his outward calm.

"I...I was wondering," he said. "That is, if you aren't doing anything this evening...."

She said simply, "I haven't any special plans."

"Well...would you like to see a show?"

"I think that would be fine." She smiled suddenly, a little breathlessly. Her dark eyes seemed to glow.

It was a perfect evening, just as Colvin had always imagined it would be. It was like a dream breathed to life and set to music. He could not recall the full details of it. There was just Doris, and everything else—the lights and the sounds, the color and movement—was just a frame for her. Doris laughing, Doris serious, Doris looking interested or surprised. This was all he wanted to remember.

H E SAW her each day after that. It seemed to him a natural thing to do, and in no way did Doris indicate that she regarded it otherwise. They would meet at the restaurant, or he would call for her at the place where she lived. They attended movies or stage shows. They bowled or went dancing. On Sunday afternoons they visited a zoo or a museum.

Frequently, then, he would have dinner at her apartment, and they would spend the rest of the evening there. They shared a growing preference for this way of passing the time. Though limited by a ridiculous-

ly tiny kitchenette, Doris proved an excellent cook.

"I seldom bothered to fix anything for myself," she said once. "It's fun to have someone to cook for. . . . Someone like you, Peter."

After the few dishes had been washed and put away, they would play gin rummy or checkers, or simply sit close together and listen to the radio, holding hands. They said little. They had reached a state of mutual trust and understanding beyond the need for words.

It was on one such evening that Colvin proposed.

"I wish we could always be together like this," he said. "Just you and I, Doris. I wish we were married and had a place of our own."

She lifted her head from his shoulder, her lips curving in a gentle smile. "Yes, Peter."

He said tensely, "Doris, do you really want it that way? Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said. Her dark eyes were shining.

Later, returning to his apartment, he recalled what the gnome-like man had said about the effects of the elixir being only temporary. But just how temporary? A matter of months, or years? Suppose. . . suppose he married Doris and suddenly became old again?

It had been from that moment on that he developed his fear of mirrors.

In the days that had followed, the fear had grown, had become an obsession. Doris had sensed the change in him. Her bewilderment and concern had added to his distress.

And now, gazing at the squat, green bottle on the bureau top, he knew he would have to tell Doris what had happened to him. There was no other way out. He could not simply leave her. Nor could he marry her for a few

stolen moments of happiness.

But later, when he appeared as usual at her apartment, he found that his resolve had weakened. Doris wore a new dress, and had made the unusual gesture of adding a touch of color to her lips. She had never seemed more appealing.

"Peter!" she said softly, smiling. She came to him, lifting her face for his kiss.

He held her tightly, lingeringly knowing he might never hold her again. Then, with a little laugh she stepped away from him, performing a mock-curtsey as she indicated her dress.

"How do you like it, Peter? It's brand, spanking new—or didn't you notice?"

"I noticed," he said. "You make it look beautiful."

She stiffened in sudden dismay sniffing "The pork chops! They're burning!"

She turned in a whirl of skirts and hurried to the kitchenette. She was very busy for several minutes. There was an energetic rattling of silverware and a clattering of dishes.

COLVIN listened to the sounds feeling the pain grow within him. He knew Doris was putting on an act, pretending a carefree attitude that she did not actually feel.

He wanted desperately to enter into the spirit of the thing, however artificial. He wanted desperately to reassure her, to recapture the trusting intimacy they had shared. But this problem was a dark, cold weight on his mind. He had to tell her of course. And he knew what her decision would be. How could he possibly expect her to marry a man who would suddenly and without warning turn old?

"Soup's on!" Doris called. She grinned impishly as she brushed a

curling tendril of brown hair from her forehead.

Her little pretense wore thin through the meal. And then, as they put away the dishes and seated themselves in the living room, the periods of strained silence between them grew longer.

It was Doris herself who suddenly brought the situation to a head.

"Peter, there's something wrong. I know there is. We can't go on like this. Whatever it is, we've got to settle it here and now."

Colvin met her searching eyes, feeling tense and cold. This was it, he knew. He was oddly relieved that it had come so soon.

Doris touched his arm pleadingly. "What is it, Peter? Why don't you tell me?"

"All right," he said. "I've been meaning to all along, but I just couldn't work up the courage." He took a deep breath, and the fear in him grew. "Doris, I'm not really a young man. That is, I look young, feel young—but I'm much older than you. I know it sounds crazy, and the explanation is even worse. But please listen, and don't hate me too much."

He told her everything. He told her of his chance meeting with the gnome-like man. He told her of the

elixir and of what it had done. And finally he was finished.

He looked at her face, and then his eyes dropped in despair to his twisting hands. That sweet, familiar face. So cold, so impassive.

Doris said nothing. She stood up. Very quietly she went into her bedroom.

Colvin stood up, too. Slowly and wearily. It was the end. He knew it was the end. Amid a bitter, death-like silence, he turned to get his hat and coat.

"Wait, Peter."

He swung around, dully surprised Doris was back. She came across the living room, toward him, and her face was somehow strange.

"You thought you had fooled me, Peter," she said. "But you were fooled, too."

He stared at her, not knowing what she meant. And now she was smiling at him. A tender, suddenly tearful smile.

"Shall I show you something Peter?" she asked. "Look."

Her hand came from where she had been holding it, behind her back. In it was a bottle.

A squat, green bottle that had once been stoppered with wax...

THE END

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 95)

py about my new existence..."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, then her eyes widened and her face went red.

From a great distance they both seemed to hear a pleased, satisfied laughter...

THE END

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NULL F

by PETER WORTH

A person can be known for his sense of humor — and so also can an era. Take, for an example, the world a hundred years from now!

"CHILDREN!" Mrs. Barnes said admonishingly. She waited until her four offspring quieted down, then turned to her husband who was carving the roast with expert, efficient flourish. "Oh, John. Are you SURE you will be all right? It seems so—so dangerous."

"Nonsense, mother," Dr. Barnes said. "It will be no more dangerous than—than going down town. After all, what is there to fear? You've seen what we have—the motion picture that showed buildings still standing and obviously kept in repair, people obviously still civilized. The cage of white mice that went with the camera came back no worse for their experience. Surely such things prove there is no danger."

His serious, dignified face turned to regard her admonishingly.

"I know," Mrs. Barnes sighed. "But I can't help worrying. You know how upset you get when things don't go as they should."

"That's different," Dr. Barnes said, laying the carving knife down carefully and starting to dish up the first plate. "You certainly aren't trying to place the minor irritations of life on a par with Adventure. Ha ha. It's utterly silly to insist that because a man can't tolerate a careless

waitress spilling soup all over his clothes he is unsuited for adventure."

He dropped a spoonful of mashed potatoes on the plate emphatically to punctuate his remark, and handed the plate to his eldest son, who started it around to its final destination, Mrs. Barnes' place.

"That isn't what I meant, John," Mrs. Barnes said patiently, "It's—well you're so DIGNIFIED. You are protected by your reputation and position."

"What makes you think I am not equally protected a hundred years in the future?" Dr. Barnes replied. "Surely this projected journey into time is already recorded there. I don't doubt but what even the time and place is well known, so that there will be a select group of scientists waiting for me to arrive!"

"You really think so, pop?" the youngest spoke up. "Gee. How could they find out? You haven't made the trip yet."

Dr. Barnes frowned affectionately at his youngest.

"In the time to which I am going," he said. "What I am GOING to do this evening at the Institute took place a century ago."

There was deep silence at the table while Dr. Barnes continued dish-



ing up plates for his assembled family. This was broken finally by Mrs. Barnes who said:

"Just the same, I won't stop worrying until you get safely back. Why don't they just take the word of the camera and let it go at that? Surely there's no need of sending YOU on a hazardous journey into the future. They could have picked a younger man."

"I insisted on taking the risk myself, dear," he answered with grave dignity. "The captain of the ship can ask no member of the crew to take risks he himself would shun."

"Gee," the youngest spoke up excitedly. "I didn't know you were a captain. I thought you always got seasick on the water."

"That was just a figure of speech, Ronald," Dr. Barnes said gently.

"Oh," the youngest said. His face lit up with a thought. "Maybe you'll get seasick on this trip, pop. Maybe there's a lot of rocking that the white mice and the camera didn't show, huh?"

"Nonsense!" Dr. Barnes said sharply; but his color turned slightly green at the thought.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Barnes said. "I'll go up right now before I forget it and put your seasickness medicine in your overnight bag. You be sure and have it ready to take just in case, John."

She hastened upstairs while Dr. Barnes continued serving, his lips compressed into grim lines of determination.

"HOW OLD is Dr. Barnes?" the reporter asked.

"Fifty-four," Dr. Walters answered.

"Fifty-four?" the reporter echoed. "Isn't that a bit old for a dangerous journey into the future? Why didn't they pick a younger man? For that

matter, why is only ONE going? Why not a small party, armed to the teeth in preparation for anything?"

"Dr. Barnes is in charge of this project," Dr. Walters said with a tinge of bitterness faintly concealed in his tone. "He decided to make the first trip himself. After all, there is no danger involved."

"How about the inventor of the time-field—George Blithewell is his name, isn't it?"

"Blithewell did not discover the time-field," Dr. Walters said icily. "He merely stumbled onto an unexplainable phenomenon. It was the research department here at the Institute that determined what he had accidentally found was indeed a time field."

"Oh, I see," the reporter said shrewdly. "Blithewell discovered a field. You scientists discovered that it was a time-field."

"That is correct," Dr. Walters said, smiling frigidly. "I might add that Blithewell STILL does not fully comprehend the mathematics that prove the nature of his accidental discovery. So very little credit is due him for his apparent discovery; especially because of the fact that modern trends in research would have uncovered it in a short time in any case. The equations of Schoupovski and Kramcoughskovitch by a simple parametric transposition and integration, with, of course, the substitution of the Einsteinian Field Equation in place of the integration constant lead, by an Abelian Group operation, to the first of the fourteen basic equations for the time field. It was merely a question of time before someone would have done this."

"Oh, I see," the reporter said vaguely. "Uh—do you have anything to say about Senator Crang's charges that the Institute is trying to squeeze Blithewell out—"

"There is nothing to those charges," Dr. Walters said heatedly. "I've just explained that Blithewell had practically less than nothing to do with the actual creation of the time machine. One might just as fairly claim that a science fiction writer invented the atom bomb, since several of them described its effects with surprising accuracy years before the bomb itself."

"I see," the reporter said absently, jotting down a few notes. He glanced at his wristwatch. "Isn't it about time for Dr. Barnes to show up?"

"Here he is now," Dr. Walters said, moving away with evident relief.

Dr. Barnes had paused dramatically at the entrance to the large room. When every head had turned in his direction he began moving with dignified stride down an aisle between the two blocks of camp chairs brought in to seat all those who had been permitted to view the historic undertaking.

HIS EYES were squinted against the glare of the winking flash cameras. His shoulders were squared manfully, carrying with graceful form the well tailored tweed coat of the suit he had bought for this special occasion. His graying hair was combed back statesmanlike. His features carried the selfsatisfaction of a man who has seen himself in the mirror and knows that every picture taken will do him credit.

"Dr. Barnes!" the reporter called, trying to overtake him. "Hold up a minute. I'm a reporter. Have you anything to tell the press before embarking on your voyage?"

Dr. Barnes winced at the reminder of his weakness for seasickness, recovered, and waited benignly for the reporter to catch up with him.

"Why, yes," he said, "I suppose I

should have something to say for the press. You might put down that I am looking forward to this experiment with great confidence that it will mark a milestone in the progress of science."

"O.K.," the reporter said, dropping behind. On his notepad he added in brackets, (Famous last words.)

Dr. John Barnes was still thrilling to the applause that had been given him as he stepped into the time machine when the intricate workings of that device silenced, and the door opened onto the world of June third, twenty forty-nine. He sighed deeply with relief at the realization that the trip had been without sensation, and carefully returned the seasickness remedy to his overnight bag.

Hesitating only for an imperceptible instant, he stepped boldly from the time machine onto the smoothly cropped lawn outside. Frowning his puzzlement at the absence of a welcoming committee, he made sure the time machine was still visible, then started walking across the lawn to what seemed to be a paved path a hundred yards away, casually swinging his overnight bag at his side.

In the distance, beyond the path, loomed buildings. Some of them were recognizable as being those that had actually been built before 1949. Others were of strange architecture, proving they had been erected since then.

Reaching the paved path he paused to firmly fix landmarks in his mind. He looked back once to see the time machine still resting on the lawn, its door open. However the key to its controls was in his pocket, so there was no danger of someone running off with the machine.

To the right the path seemed to curve further into the park. To the left it seemed to curve gradually to-

ward the buildings, though shrubbery quickly blocked off the view of the path.

As he began walking Dr. Barnes felt a vague disappointment. So far it had not been any different than walking in any public park back in 1949, except for the absence of people. Where were the people?

As if in answer to his unvoiced question a man appeared ahead walking toward him. He was wearing loose shorts and a long sleeved, double-breasted sport jacket, both of bright orange.

Feeling quite excited over this impending meeting with a man of the future, Dr. Barnes studied his appearance carefully. He was of medium height, appeared about twenty-five years of age, with a tanned complexion and regular features. He could have been strolling along a park of 1949 without attracting attention in any way.

AS HE CAME near Dr. Barnes stopped, a pleasant smile of anticipation on his face, his hand extended for a handshake. It was still extended when the man of the future passed him; but the smile was being replaced by surprised discomfiture.

The next instant Dr. Barnes felt something strike the back of his neck and trickle down under his collar.

He turned. The man of the future was calmly returning a small black gun to a pocket inside his double-breasted sportshirt. He was looking at Dr. Barnes without expression.

Dr. Barnes, his mind frozen with the possible implications of the gun, wiped the back of his neck with his hand and brought it slowly around to where he could see it. The fluid was—not blood, but something color-

less. He cautiously tasted it. It seemed to be water.

The man of the future, still without facial expression, turned and continued on his way. Dr. Barnes watched him, a wondering, dazed look on his face.

"If it weren't an utter absurdity," he said to himself. "I would swear that man shot a water pistol at me."

A trifle shaken by this unorthodox experience, Dr. Barnes continued on down the path, deciding to seek further rather than chase after this first person—who seemed more worth avoiding than cultivating.

Ahead something seemed to be laying across the walk. Advancing cautiously, Dr. Barnes saw that it was a fine string of some sort of plastic, its ends out of sight in the bushes on both sides of the walk.

Just inside the concealment of the bushes where the string vanished were two men, very much like the first had been in appearance. Each was squatted down, one hand holding an end of the string.

"Amazing!" Dr. Barnes said to himself. "These grown men seemed as if they were planning on jerking this string and tripping me—but of course that is absurd. There must be something more to this than what there is on the surface."

He took another step as if about to step across the string. Instantly the two men drew it taught, six inches above the walk.

Dr. Barnes stepped over it. The two men of the future, their faces revealing no expression, dropped the string on the walk again.

"Just what is this?" Dr. Barnes asked curiously.

As if in answer, one of the men drew a gun out of his shirt and calmly squirted a stream of water in Dr. Barnes' face.

Dr. Barnes calmly took his hand-

kerchief from its pocket and wiped off the water. Inside him was a vague alarm. Could this be perhaps the grounds of a hospital for the mentally ill?

Returning his handkerchief to his pocket he took a firmer grip on his overnight bag and continued along the walk. He looked back after he had gone a few yards. The string lay slack on the walk. It was too far away to see the two men in the concealment of the bushes.

Shrugging, he continued walking.

HE HAD taken only a few more steps when a running figure suddenly came into view. It was a young lady, dressed almost the same as the three men he had seen. Behind her was a fourth man, apparently chasing her.

She brushed past Dr. Barnes without giving any evidence of having seen him. The man did the same. Dr. Barnes turned to watch them.

Shrugging, he continued walking across the walk. He watched with renewed interest as the young woman came to it. It remained slack on the walk when she ran over it, then drew taut as the pursuer came to it, tripping him neatly.

The victim was still flying forward in a sprawl as one of the concealed young men sprang into view and ran after the girl.

The one who had tripped on the string stood up, looked after the departing pair, and took the place of the one who had sprung from the bushes.

"Well, I'll be—" Dr. Barnes muttered aloud. He shook his head slowly and continued on his way.

The walk came to a bridge that arched over a small pond upon which ducks and swans were floating lazily. At the other side of the pond

the path entered on a sidewalk at a three-way street intersection.

With a cluck of satisfaction Dr. Barnes hastened his steps—with a wary eye out for strings across the walk, and whatever else might appear unexpectedly. He wondered briefly at the absence of a fence here at the edge of what he was now firmly convinced was the grounds of a hospital for the mentally unbalanced.

There were no cars in sight. In fact, there were none parked at the curb in any direction. There were, however, plenty of people. Most of them were dressed in loose shorts and double-breasted sportshirts, both men and women.

They were walking husily along, intent on their own affairs, just as any street crowd in 1949 would be.

Dr. Barnes joined them, beginning to wonder just how he was going to breach the subject of his recent arrival on the future, and to whom.

Would it be best to just stop someone and say, "Pardon me, sir; but I just arrived from the year 1949. I don't intend to stay more than a few hours, and would like to be notified a bit before I return to the past."

He was suddenly shocked out of his deep concentration on the problem by a cascade of the now familiar stream of water from a water pistol. He blinked it out of his eyes and stared at the comely young lady who was casually replacing the gun inside her blouse.

"My dear young lady," he said, making no effort to keep the irritation out of his voice. "Was that really necessary?"

At once a crowd gathered. A notepad and pencil appeared in the young lady's hand. She began getting people to sign it, saying to each, "Did you hear what he said?"

Did you notice the irritation in his tone?"

Each nodded grimly and eagerly wrote on the paper. While Dr. Barnes watched this with a feeling that something distinctly over his head was going on, a policeman materialized through the crowd.

"What's your name, sir?" he asked politely.

"Dr. Barnes, Dr. John Barnes." Dr. Barnes' eyes lit up. This was the chance he had been hoping for. "I'm Dean of the Eastern Research Institute. I've just arrived from the year 1949 in a time machine."

"Excellent, sir," the policeman said politely. "But why should one of your apparent skill," he glanced admiringly at the tweed suit as he spoke, "breach the peace so clumsily?"

HE WROTE on a slip of paper, tore it from the pad he held in his hand, and handed it to Dr. Barnes. He gave the carbon to the young lady and carefully placed the carbon sheet between the next two sheets of his book.

Dr. Barnes read his slip of paper and saw it was a summons to appear in court. He looked up indignantly, to see that the crowd, the young lady who had squirted him, and the policeman were gone. People were streaming past him unconcernedly.

He half turned, starting to obey an impulse to return to the Time machine and escape. But ahead was a sign that denoted a cafe. That, and the realization that no one in 1949 would believe anything he could tell of his experiences, decided him to stay awhile longer.

Bracing his shoulders, he started walking again. Slowly he became aware that someone was keeping pace with him. It was a young man who seemed no different than the

others.

"I'll bite," the young man said.

"You'll bite?" Dr. Barnes echoed. A fierce joy appeared on his face. "Tricks," he thought. "Let's see how he likes THIS one." Then, aloud. "You'll bite. Fine. I'll join you in a bite. I'm a bit hungry myself." And he watched the young man out of the corner of his eye to see his reaction.

"Thank you," was the reply. "It's very generous of you."

Feeling slightly deflated, Dr. Barnes led the way into the cafe.

"Look," the young man said when they were seated. "Were you serious out there about being from 1949? It's just possible, you know."

Dr. Barnes jerked his eyes away from the spectacle of a customer tripping a waiter with a tray full of food.

"What?" he asked. "Oh. Yes, certainly. I'm from 1949 all right. I haven't been here more than fifteen minutes, and so far I can't understand anything of what I've seen. I suppose it makes sense—in a way; but what that sense is I can't figure out."

A waiter set a cup of coffee in front of Dr. Barnes and the young man. The young man promptly placed the end of a water pistol in it and pulled back a pin. Most of the coffee vanished into the pistol. He then proceeded to drink the rest, his face calmly expressionless.

Dr. Barnes raised his cup to his lips and cautiously tasted the beverage. It was hot coffee—loaded with salt.

"Phew!" he said disgustedly, spitting it out.

"You saw that?" the waiter said to the young man, jerking out a notepad and extending it with a pencil. The young man nodded gravely and signed a name on the paper.

Dr. Barnes, an angry glint in his eye, gave the waiter a vicious kick in the shin. The waiter had just taken the pad from the young man. He dropped it and shouted, "OUCH!"

"You heard that?" Dr. Barnes said gravely, taking his own notepad from the breast pocket of his coat and handing it to the young man, along with his fountain pen.

"You know," the young man said calmly, ignoring the pad. "I'm beginning to believe you ARE from 1949. What you have just done is a capital offense, and no one in their right mind would have done such a thing deliberately."

"Capital offense?" Dr. Barnes said, half rising. "Then what in the—the wide blue yonder are all the tricks that have been played on ME? Social amenities?"

"Right," the young man said calmly. "And that's the reason I'm so sure you are kidding me when you insist you are from 1949."

"Let's put off questions about my veracity until after we've had something to eat," Dr. Barnes said. He fixed the waiter with a fierce, threatening gaze. "Do you suppose you could bring me—us, something fit to eat—with no soap or other tricky stuff concealed in it? Something that tastes good and that I can relax and enjoy eating without wondering if the next bite is loaded with pepper?"

THE WAITER, still nursing his ankle, looking questioningly at the young man, who nodded imperceptibly.

"Yes, sir," he said. He limped away. Dr. Barnes watched him go, a satisfied gleam in his eyes, then turned back to the young man.

"Now, young man," he said. "I wonder if you'd answer a few questions for me?"

"Of course," the young man replied.

Dr. Barnes took a deep breath.

"Why did that young lady squirt water on me?" he began. "Why did the waiter serve me coffee with salt in it—when yours was all right? And why did you fill a squirt gun with your coffee like you did?"

"To squirt you with, of course," the young man said. He calmly took out his gun and squirted its entire contents in Dr. Barnes' face.

Dr. Barnes took out his handkerchief and wiped the coffee off his face. His hands were shaking from the effort at self control. He watched the young man during the process. The young man looked back at him with studied indifference.

With his face fairly dry, Dr. Barnes put his handkerchief back in his pocket.

"You answered my last question first," he said, his voice very quiet. "Now, how about the first one. Why did the young lady squirt water on me?"

"I'll answer your second question next," the young man said. "My coffee had salt in it too. For the first question, the young lady either thought she knew you, or she wanted to get acquainted with you. You should have felt complimented." He leaned forward, evidently warming up to his subject. "The salt in the coffee is a specialty of this cafe—though of course it is more or less of a standard welcome in most of the lower class cafes such as this one. It was the waiter's way of welcoming you."

"I see," Dr. Barnes said grimly. "Sort of a practical joke to make me feel at home."

"That's right," the young man said. For the first time he smiled. "My name is Joe Cartwright," he said, extending his hand.

Mrs. Barnes and her four children occupied the five seats closest to the platform where the time machine would re-appear. Next to her sat the reporter, his notebook still in his hand.

Farther on in the front row the Institute scientists sat nervously, impatient for the time machine to come back. The several hundred other people in the large room were talking together in low voices that created a humming effect in the atmosphere.

Photographers stood about uncomfortably, their cameras ready for the first hazy materialization of the machine. And on a raised platform at the rear of the room a television camera was running, directed at the spot where all eyes centered.

"Now, now, Mrs. Barnes," the reporter said consolingly. "You musn't worry so much. Nothing can happen to your husband. People of the future are just as civilized as we are. No doubt Dr. Barnes is being feted and given the keys to the city, and all sorts of honors."

"But I can't help worrying," Mrs. Barnes said. "Suppose it was—will be—that is, suppose it's raining when he steps out of the machine. I forgot to make him take his rubbers. And suppose," a new horror dawned on her face, "suppose he catches some new disease that we don't know anything about now? John is SO susceptible to colds and diseases."

"Boy, have you got a worry bug," the reporter said admiringly. "My wife should take lessons from you!"

MRS. BARNES opened her mouth to retort. But suddenly she, and all the rest, forgot everything. A hazy shape was taking form on the platform. It was the time machine returning! Photoflash bulbs were

going off like mad. The reporter's fingers became a blur of motion as he jotted down his impressions.

Mrs. Barnes twisted her fingers in a frenzy of anxiety. Her four offspring chewed gum rapidly, their eyes large and round. Everyone else seemed paralyzed.

The machine became solid. No one was breathing as the door slowly opened. No one breathed for a space of ten seconds after it opened.

Dr. Barnes stepped out. He was wearing a pair of loose yellow trunks that revealed hairy, stocky legs, discolored here and there by blue network of veins. The yellow, double-breasted sportshirt definitely looked better on him than the tweed coat that he had been wearing had looked.

The strange sound of a hundred people taking a deep breath went unheard in the intensity of the moment. Gasps were silently exploding everywhere.

Dr. Barnes stepped forward to the edge of the platform slowly. His face was completely expressionless, his eyes calm. He wiggled the blunt black pistol in his hand in a menacing manner.

"Mother! Children!" he said brittly. "Come up here. Get in the time machine."

"John!" Mrs. Barnes gasped.

"Better do as he says," the reporter said in a low voice. "He's mad."

"Y-y-y-yes, John," Mrs. Barnes said. "Do as your father says, children."

The five of them trailed past Dr. Barnes and stepped into the time machine.

"Is pop crazy, mom?" the youngest asked loudly.

Dr. Barnes retreated toward the door of the time machine. His eyes darted here and there, warily.

"He's insane!" the reporter shout-

ed. "Rush him. He can't get all of us before we down him!"

Suiting his action to his words he darted forward, his eyes on the knuckle of Dr. Barnes' finger curled around the trigger.

He saw that finger whiten, and the gun turn toward him. He launched himself in a long low dive. He felt no pain—only the warm sticky wetness that covered his neck and trickled down. He lay there, feeling it trickle toward his mouth.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87

cracked under the strain. I don't remember a thing. They tell me I walked out of the store one evening and was found wandering four days later. Nothing had happened to me, really nothing, Bob. It's a weird thing to look back on—a hole in your life. But I'm none the worse for wear.

But here's some good news. Old Crawly-Fingers Bluett died of a heart attack at the carnival I went to that day. You know what? I bet someone who knows me saw me there and told him, and he came all the way to the carnival to see if he could find me! Well he didn't.

My job at Hartford's is waiting for me whenever I get back. And listen—remember the wild tale about the young guitarist that lent me \$300 that awful night? He sent a note around to Hartford's for me. It said he had just inherited a business worth two million and I was to keep the money. I just don't know what to do. No one knows where he is or anything about him. He's left town permanently. One of the neighbors told me he had two little daughters. Anyway he had two little girls with him

He tasted it. It was salt to the taste—like blood. Later—much later, he swore he hadn't fainted; but by that time Dr. Barnes was introducing his family to the delightful customs of the twenty-first century.

"Customs," he was saying. "That outrage the 1949 sense of dignity as much as those of 1949 would offend the 1849 sense of dignity—but very soul-satisfying once you get onto them."

THE END

when he left. So the money's in the bank and Daddy's legacy in the bag.

So don't worry. Specially about me. As for those four days, they didn't leave a mark on me; well, a little bruise on one cheek, but that's nothing. They were probably good days. Sometimes when I'm waking up, I have a feeling—I can almost put my finger on it—it's sort of a half memory about loving somebody who was very, very good. But maybe I made that up. Now you're laughing at me...

* *

Part of a conversation:

"We can wait right here," said the roustabout. "In my fourteen years in the carnies, I never heard the likes o' this."

The new animal man rested his hand on the guys of the cook tent and listened, entranced. "Who in time is that?"

"The Maneater. The Boss. Up there by himself with that baby he adopted and his collection o' rhinestones or whatever they are. He picks 'em up all over. But don't he play a mess o' guitar?"

THE END

WORLDS OF WONDER

THE DREAMING JEWELS

by Theodore Sturgeon

FIDO

by Mack Reynolds

THE MECHANICAL GENIUS

by Gilbert Grant

A NICKEL SAVED

by Robert Krepps

NULL F

by Peter Worth

THE BOTTLE

by Guy Archette

